

TAOISM AND CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENTAL LITERATURE

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This thesis encompasses a survey of contemporary environmental literature (1970's to the present) as it relates to the tenets of Taoist literature, specifically the *Chuang Tzu* and the *Tao te Ching*. The thesis also presents and evaluates pertinent criticisms concerning the practice of relating modern environmental problems to ancient Chinese philosophy.

The thesis contains a preface that describes the historic roots of Taoism as well as an explanation of the Chinese terminology in the paper. The environmental literature is divided into three major groups and discussed in the three chapters of the paper. The three groups include mainstream environmentalists, deep ecology, and ecofeminism.

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## PREFACE

### TAOISM IN CHINESE HISTORY

The Spring and Autumn Period (722-481 BC) of Chinese history includes the beginning of the Golden Age of Chinese philosophy, also called the period of the hundred schools (551-233). According to traditional thought, the greatest Chinese philosophers lived during this period: Confucius, Mo Tzu, Lao Tzu, Mencius, Chuang Tzu, Yang Chu, and others. These philosophers spawned rival schools of thought (*chias*) that competed for followers during the chaotic Warring States Period (480-221 BC). Three influential philosophies of the 100 schools were Confucianism, Ming chia (the School of Names), and Taoism. In Chinese culture, philosophy permeates every aspect of life; thus, these teachings have shaped Chinese moral, social, and political behavior over the centuries.

The philosophy of Confucius (551-479 BC) was based on a hierarchical order of morality, virtue, and duty to family, state, and the memory of revered ancestors. The Confucian Analects (*Lun Yu*), a collection of quotable aphorisms, advocates extensive knowledge of rules and ritual, service to society, and proper conduct. In Confucianist theory, society should be well ordered and obedient to a competent authority. The Confucian precept of the “rectification of names” defined the restrictions and responsibilities of each class in a strict hierarchical structure.

The School of Names, Ming chia, studied the relationship between *ming* (names) and *shih*, the actualities that they represent. Its followers examined the significance of the names themselves, analyzing thought on a rational level. The members of this school were known as skilled debaters who often used linguistic devices to win arguments.

Counter to these highly ordered, intellectual, and society-oriented philosophies, Taoist teachings emphasize the spontaneous potential of the individual. Fung Yu-lan asserts that the three phases of Taoism are represented by the teachings of three of its prominent philosophers: Yang Chu, Lao Tzu, and Chuang Tzu.

The philosophy of Yang Chu (his dates are unclear, but probably early 4<sup>th</sup> century) characterize the earliest phase of Taoism. Much of what is known about him comes from the Taoist works, the *Lieh-tzu* and the *Chuang Tzu*. He was one of many recluses who “obscured themselves from the world,” retreating from society in order to maintain their “personal purity.” This self-imposed seclusion provided time for contemplation on the nature of reality and a meaningful system of thought. According to the *Lieh-tzu*, Yang Chu’s guiding principle was the preservation of life from death and injury. “Each one for himself,” and the “despising of things and the valuing of life,” were two of his fundamental ideas.<sup>1</sup> Several sources report that when Yang Chu was asked about his responsibility to society, he responded that he would not sacrifice one hair from his body, even if it were to profit the whole world.<sup>2</sup> He stressed the importance of the individual over wealth and position; in his opinion, the best way to preserve life was to be useless and unremarkable. He believed that when things and people were deemed valuable to society, they were often used up or destroyed. Both Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu reaffirm his ideas in their respective texts.

The *Tao te Ching* represents the second phase of Taoist thought. Although tradition attributes authorship to a Chinese sage called Lao Tzu, an elder contemporary of Confucius, the name translates literally as “old master.” Most scholars claim that the text

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<sup>1</sup> Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: The Free Press, 1946), p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

is a composite of adages from many different sources; yet Lao Tzu is customarily cited when quoting the *Tao te Ching*. The dates of the *Tao te Ching* are traditionally placed at the same time as Confucius; however, H. G. Creel states that evidence against this assumption is overwhelming. Creel states: “The book of Lao Tzu refers constantly to ideas that were unknown at the time of Confucius and did not become current until much later.”<sup>3</sup>

The *Tao te Ching* offers a very different view of life than the rigid, virtue-based approach of Confucianism; it evokes a spontaneous simplicity that comes from following nature. In the highly political *Tao te Ching*, Lao Tzu describes a state ruled by a sage-king who governs by “non-action,” where the people live free from strife and desire. All things are connected as one in the harmony of *tao*, “the source of all being and the undivided unity in which all the contradictions and distinctions of existence are ultimately resolved.”<sup>4</sup> According to Fung Yu Lan, the analogy and metaphor of the *Tao te Ching* help to preserve life by urging compliance with natural forces.

The third phase of Taoism is expressed by the philosophy of Chuang Tzu (369-286 BC). Chuang Tzu lived the life of a rugged individualist who turns his back on society, not unlike that of the recluse Yang Chu. Allegedly, King Wei of Ch’u offered Chuang Tzu the position of chief minister, but Chuang Tzu just laughed, told him to go away, and then went fishing.<sup>5</sup> The *Chuang Tzu* emphasizes the relativity of all things; given that all things are manifestations of the whole, *tao*, all “facts” become arbitrary.

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<sup>3</sup> H. G. Creel, *Chinese Thought from Confucius to Mao Tse-tung* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 98.

<sup>4</sup> William De Bary, Wing-Tsit Chan, and Burton Watson, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 49-50.

<sup>5</sup> Fung Yu Lan, *Chinese Philosophy*, p. 49.

Chuang Tzu was skeptical of all absolutes; good or bad, right or wrong, this thing or that thing, even life and death were considered relative labels in his philosophy. Chuang Tzu celebrated the natural differences of things, but not artificially imposed distinctions. In Taoist thought, every entity possesses its own *te* or innate potential. For Chuang Tzu, fully and freely exercising *te* is the route to happiness and goodness, while following man leads to pain and evil.

Chuang Tzu spoke a great deal about emotions, especially the grief and sorrow concerning death. It was his contention that the sage has a complete understanding of the relativity of things, therefore he is not affected by the changes of the world, including life and death. Therefore, happiness is not dependent on or limited by external things. One can attain “peace of the soul” by transcending distinctions and identifying oneself with the universe.

There are specific concepts that are closely associated with Taoist thought: *tao*, *te*, *ying/yang*, *wu-wei*, and *chi*. Although some of these concepts are not unique to Taoism, they are expanded on by Taoist philosophy. Confucius spoke of *tao* as a principle or path, its literal translation; the *Analects* referred to *tao* as a course of correct conduct. Chuang Tzu’s concept of *tao* is not just one substance in the whole of reality; it is not a substance at all. *Tao* is the means, method, and “way” of unity and harmony in the individual and the whole of reality, the One. *Tao*’s manifestations are in constant flux, yet in a larger sense, its balanced forces are unchanging. Tao has countless manifestations, yet Tao is indivisible as “the uncarved block.” The *Tao te Ching* contends that *tao* is “nameless,” shadowy and indistinct,” and “without form or feature.” In contrast to the intellectual analysis of the School of Names, Taoism claims that *tao* is

indescribable, unnamable, and unknowable; if it can be named it is not *tao*. *Tao* exists in everything and connects all things in its overarching unity. It lies beyond the realm of things or substances that can be named, it can only be known by observing their actions.

The action of *tao* is reversal or “turning back.” This principle states that each thing moves to its extreme only to then revert back to its origin; “To go further and further means to revert again.” Reversal is a cyclic process of transformation, ever changing, yet always in balance. The general principle of reversal engenders numerous Taoist adages: the weak overcoming the strong, the supple overcoming the rigid, the lowly overcoming the lofty, and decrease leading to increase. These contraries are not seen as independent states but as balancing points of a continuous polarity. This interpretation is illustrated by the *yin/yang* symbol, a circle composed of two undulating halves of dark and light flowing into each other even as each half contains a small dot or seed of its opposite. The *yin/yang* figure, the Great Round, represents the inseparable connection of opposites: one extreme cannot exist without its complementary opposite—each one is necessary to define the other.

Another Taoist principle of nature is *wu-wei*, “having no activity” or non-action. *Wu-wei* is sometimes interpreted as doing less to achieve an end, not over-doing. This principle emphasizes the importance of acting in accordance with natural forces or “following nature.” The natural potential of an individual thing, its *te*, unfolds in a spontaneous process of interaction with the innate capacities, or *tes*, of all other things. Each being follows its own course even as it is receptive to the dynamic energy of *ch’i* connecting it to other entities.



## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. ....	ii
PREFACE. ....	iii
INTRODUCTION. ....	1
Chapter	
1. TAOISM AND MAINSTREAM ENVIRONMENTAL LITERATURE. . . .	3
Interconnectedness and Interpenetration	
Wu-wei as Appropriate Technology	
Emergent Theory and the Creative Character of Te	
Criticisms and Conclusions	
2. DEEP ECOLOGY AND TAOIST THOUGHT. ....	40
The Relation of Humanity and Nature	
The Endorsement of the Simple Life	
The Maxim of Following Nature	
Criticisms and Conclusions	
3. ECOFEMINISM AND TAOIST THOUGHT. ....	70
Intuitive Knowledge in Ecofeminism and Taoist Literature	
Feminine Spirituality in Taoism and Ecofeminism	
The Biological Connection Between Women and Nature	
Criticisms and Conclusions	
CONCLUSIONS. ....	89
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY. ....	96

Thought itself is born of crisis. And important thinking presupposes important crises. . . . Thinking, then, entails the search for novel evidences.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The present crisis in the environment provides incentive in the search for alternative views of the human/nature relationship. Environmental groups are seeking a fresh perspective with novel insights into the problem. Many environmentalist writers have examined Asian cultures, particularly Taoism, in search of those insights. In one form or another, mainstream environmentalism, deep ecology, and ecofeminism all relate Taoist thought to their respective theories. Numerous critics have presented objections to any correlation of contemporary environmental ethics and ancient Chinese philosophy. This study undertakes a review of Taoist thought in contemporary environmental literature, as well as an evaluation of the criticisms raised against it. An assessment of both the relevance of Taoist concepts and the validity of the criticisms can reveal the legitimacy of the parallels drawn by these environmental groups.

The primary Taoist texts cited are the *Tao te Ching*, the D. C. Lau translation unless otherwise stated,<sup>2</sup> and the *Chuang Tzu*, from *Sources of Chinese Tradition, vol. I*, translation by Yi-pao Mei.<sup>3</sup> By their very nature, these works are open to conflicting, even contradictory, interpretations; this is an issue dealt with later in this chapter. Another issue is the difficulty of relating the cryptic 2,400 year-old works of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu to contemporary Western understanding. Are there differences between the

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<sup>1</sup> David Hall, "On Seeking a Change of Environment: A Quasi-Taoist Proposal," *Philosophy East and West* 47 (1997): 160-172.

<sup>2</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, trans. and intro. D.C. Lau (New York: Penguin Books, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> Chuang Tzu, *Chuang Tzu*, in *Sources of Chinese Tradition, vol. II*, eds. William Theodore de Bary, Wing-tsit Chan, Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 62-85.

two cultures significant enough to render the ancient philosophies incompatible with present environmental problems? The question is: do the analogies and metaphors of these texts hold any relevance to modern ecological understanding?

The three different environmental viewpoints include mainstream environmentalism, deep ecology, and ecofeminism. In what follows, there may be questions as to why certain authors are included in each category; however, an introductory explanation of each classification should explain the inclusion or omission of a particular author. Other deep ecology groups (such as Deep Green) are included in the discussion of deep ecological theory in addition to supporters of Naess's Deep Ecology. Each environmental position emphasizes particular aspects of Taoist ideology that pertain directly to their specific agendas, but there are also shared premises from Taoist literature among all three groups.

## CHAPTER ONE

### TAOISM AND MAINSTREAM ENVIRONMENTAL LITERATURE

Mainstream environmental writers such as J. Baird Callicott, Po-Keung Ip, Roger T. Ames, and Chung-ying Cheng draw a parallel between contemporary environmental theory and Taoist concepts. Although this ancient Chinese philosophy is germane to many environmental topics, mainstream environmentalists emphasize the Taoist passages that underscore principles of their respective theories. This blending of ideologies includes the following three points that also serve as the sections of this chapter:

1. The interconnectedness and interpenetration of all entities
2. The creative and transforming properties of *te* and *ch'i*
3. The principle of *wu-wei*, or “acting naturally,” as a model for interaction with nature.

The first section of this chapter provides a discussion of the interconnectedness and interpenetration of all entities, a view long held in Chinese culture but a fairly recent discovery of the Western scientific community. Environmental writers, including Callicott, Tucker, and Po-Keung Ip, maintain that an alternate frame of reference can help the West to understand and value nature by clarifying humanity’s position in it. Current scientific and ecological findings support a more holistic view of the environment – such such an organismic analysis also reflects the Taoist approach toward the universe. Many mainstream writers claim that Taoism may provide a conceptual resource for a more viable perspective towards nature.

The second section discusses the doctrine of *wu-wei*, generally translated as acting in “accordance with nature.” This principle plays a major role in the *Tao te Ching* as a

model both for relating to nature and for social/political behavior. Environmental groups adjust the interpretation with varying degrees of stringency depending on their particular theories. Consequently, mainstream environmentalists often interpret *wu-wei* as the use of appropriate technology.

The third section addresses the parallel between the Taoist principles of *te* and *ch'i* as they correspond to the emergent theory of systems ecology. Authors such as Po-Keung Ip, Chung-ying Cheng, and Roger T. Ames have commented on this connection. Although considered primarily an Asian scholar, Ames has written a number of works focussing on the environmental implications of these important Taoist principles. He compares the Taoist doctrine of the particular, *te*, in the overarching unity known as *tao* to the field/focus theory. He holds that this interaction, through the transforming energy of *ch'i*, results in the constant auto-regenerating and self-expressive creativity of nature.

### *Section 1*

#### *Interconnectedness and Interpenetration*

##### *Interconnectedness in Taoism*

Shu-hsien Liu describes the unifying concept of *Tao* as *li-i-fen-shu*, a Neo-Confucian term translated as “the principle is one, but the manifestations are many.” He claims that, for the Chinese, “external nature is never understood on its own terms; it is always intimately related with human life.”<sup>4</sup> It is his opinion that, because early Chinese culture never developed a mechanical explanation for the universe, it never took the

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<sup>4</sup> Shu-hsien Liu, “Toward a New Relation between Humanity and Nature: Reconstructing Tien-Jen-Ho-I,” *Zygon* 24 (1989): 459.

reductionist detour that was made in Western philosophy. Although not doing so may have slowed early scientific progress, Shu-hsien Liu claims that the Chinese avoided what Whitehead called the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. Chinese culture rejected the separation of form from content; this mode of thinking inevitably led to a more organic view of nature. In disallowing the rationalist notion of separate and concrete others, Chinese culture upheld the belief that reality consists of the countless manifestations of one unbroken continuum, *tao*. On the other hand, Shu-hsien Liu claims that the disconnected approach of Western thought resulted in a feeling of meaninglessness. He asserts, “We are isolated from nature to the extent that we become strangers in the universe.”<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, this detachment has produced callousness towards nature; because humans are not connected to the environment, they tolerate higher levels of ecological abuse. He maintains that Western philosophy should seek alternative worldviews, especially from Asian cultures, to achieve a closer relationship to nature. Houston Smith describes the unity within Chinese philosophy.

The Chinese developed the cosmological myth by viewing the universe as an organic system of interdependent parts. . . . The view led to the fundamental unity of all things in their essential aspects. . . . To designate this divine ecology, the Chinese used the word Tao.<sup>6</sup>

Smith describes *Tao* as a relative concept that defines interconnected entities by their relationships. “Multiplicity is itself a unity. As nothing exists by itself, all things being in fact interdependent, no phenomena can be understood by divorcing it from its surroundings. Indeed, it is the underlying unity that provides the possibility for

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<sup>5</sup> Shu-hsien Liu, “New Relation,” p. 459.

<sup>6</sup> Huston Smith, “Tao Now,” *Earth Might Be Fair: Reflections on Ethics, Religion and Ecology*, ed. I.G. Barbor (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 74.

distinctions.”<sup>7</sup> The *yin/yang* diagram symbolizes this blended unity and illustrates its complementary interpenetration. “Being is organic. Peculiarities dissolve, parts fuse into other parts. Each individual melds into other individuals and through this melding makes its contribution, leaves its mark.”<sup>8</sup> Smith concludes that this indivisible fusion of particulars unquestionably includes humankind, in so far as they follow *tao*.

### *Interconnectedness in Mainstream Environmental Literature*

Several years ago, a television commercial portrayed the global interdependence of the business world. It showed a butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the world and suggested that this action had caused a chain of events resulting in a rain-soaked traffic jam in New York City. The commercial was loosely based on a Chinese proverb that proclaimed the interconnectedness of even trivial things. Any direct causation at this miniscule level is, of course, absurd. Nevertheless, in a broader context the commercial illustrated the growing awareness, even in the Western business world, of an interdependent global community. Independent actions in a remote part of the world can, and do, have serious repercussions throughout the planet; Chernobyl is such an example. The separatist approach of Western reductionism is giving way to an attitude of global integration and correlation. For many environmental authors, Chinese philosophy presents an ecologically sound alternative to the West’s separatist viewpoint of the last two centuries. Russell Goodman illustrates the West’s disregard of intrinsic connectedness in his article “Taoism and Ecology.”

We toss garbage into the oceans and rivers, and are surprised when it doesn’t just disappear, but turns up somewhere else. In our everyday thinking, we tend to assume that when something goes down the drain it is

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

gone forever. The fact that the Earth cycles elements conflicts with the rationale of projects like the Four Corners power plant. Los Angeles gets much of the electricity from this project with, seemingly, none of the pollution caused by burning strip mined soft coal. But the ash, sulphur, and mercury goes elsewhere- to Albuquerque, to points east, eventually back to Los Angeles. We treat the atmosphere like a giant sewer. Perhaps the most dangerous failure to appreciate the earth's cycles lies in our treatment of nuclear wastes. . . . Even a small amount can cause widespread death and mutation. . . . Increased levels of radioactivity may produce gradual effects rather than the sudden destruction of an atomic explosion. A contemporary ecology textbook contains a warning in harmony with the Taoist outlook: "There are no dead spaces at the surface of the earth where elements may vanish or 'be got rid of.' Things are only moved around, sooner or later they will be back."<sup>9</sup>

Other environmental writers echo this sentiment. In *Worldviews and Ecology*, Mary Evelyn Tucker has suggested that aspects of Eastern religion hold promise for the reevaluation of humans' relationship to nature.

As we seek a new balance in human-earth relations, it is clear that the perspectives from other religious and philosophical traditions may be instrumental in formulating new ways of thinking and acting more appropriate to both the vast rhythms and the inevitable limitations of nature. As our worldview with nature is more clearly defined, we can hope that our actions will reflect both a Taoist appreciation of natural ecology and a Confucian commitment to social and political ecology.<sup>10</sup>

According to Tucker, the organic, vitalistic worldview of Taoism can provide balance by cultivating a new ecological perspective, thus "challenging us to radically re-examine our relations" with the environment.<sup>11</sup>

It is no longer ecologically prudent to assume that human beings stand apart from nature as independent entities. The Enlightenment's scientific view saw nature as "passive deadwood"—standardized, interchangeable, and (most significantly) only

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<sup>9</sup> Russell Goodman, "Taoism and Ecology," *Environmental Ethics* 2 (1980): 75.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A. Grim, *Worldviews and Ecology* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1993), p. 158.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.



externally related. Paul Shepard describes the West's inherited image of the natural world. "Animals and plants are arrayed on the landscape like furniture arranged in a room. As chairs are related to tables, so is the fauna to the flora. There may be order, but it is imposed from without; there may be a relationship but it is external."<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly enough, the science of ecology has done much to rescind this attitude in favor of an integrated and organic view. Markus and Tarla Rai Peterson have noted that, according to Begor, Harper, and Townsend, "The implication that communities and eco-systems can be studied as separate entities is wrong. No ecological system, whether individual, population or community can be studied in isolation from the environment in which it exists."<sup>13</sup> They assert that natural systems do not exist outside of their contextual links.<sup>14</sup> Contemporary ecology is presenting an interrelated perspective that emphasizes an entity's relationships rather than a perspective that views the entity discretely. J. Baird Callicott illustrates this point: "Ecology reverses the typically Western focus on the figure at the expense of the ground in the proverbial figure-ground gestalt. Relationships are ontologically upgraded, and classical entities, proportionately, ontologically downgraded."<sup>15</sup> Ralph Metzner agrees with this more unified approach, calling it an "organismic view, which sees the universe as an evolving process . . . in homeostatic reciprocal interaction between living organisms and the physico-chemical environment."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> J. Baird Callicott, *Earth's Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean to the Australian Outback* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> Markus Peterson and Tarla Rai Peterson, "Ecology: Scientific, Deep, and Feminist," *Environmental Values* 5 (1996): 132-33.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>15</sup> Callicott, *Insights*, p. 84.

<sup>16</sup> Ralph Metzner, "The Emerging Ecological Worldview," from Tucker and Grim, *Worldviews*, p. 165.

This new development in the scientific community provides a conceptual parallel with Asian philosophies, especially Taoism. The integrated character of systems theory closely resembles the vital interconnectedness of *tao*. Callicott remarks on the correlation between the Chinese concept of *Tao* and ecological interrelatedness.

The emerging global scientific worldview is not as conceptually dissonant with the world's many indigenous intellectual traditions . . . as its predecessor, the mechanical worldview. Thus an international environmental ethic firmly grounded in ecology and buttressed by the new physics will complement, rather than clash with, the environmental ethics implicit in the world's many indigenous traditions of thought.<sup>17</sup>

The interpenetration of Taoism relates to other aspects of ecological interrelatedness as well. Callicott names early environmental authors such as Alan Watts and Lynn White, Jr., who naively praised Eastern philosophies, including Taoism, for their man-nature relationship. Another early environmental author, Roderick Nash, states, "In the Far East, the man-nature relationship was marked by respect, bordering on love, absent in the West . . . man was understood to be part of Nature."<sup>18</sup> Alan Watts describes the Taoist view of reality in *Tao, The Watercourse Way* as "that every thing-event (*shih* or *wu*) is what it is only in relation to all others."<sup>19</sup>

More recently, Chung-ying Cheng and Po-Keung Ip have also written about the similarities of the two perspectives. Chung-ying Cheng describes the Chinese model of causality in nature as being "anti-mechanistic and therefore organistic" as well as

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<sup>17</sup> Callicott, *Insights*, pp. 209-10.

<sup>18</sup> Roderick Nash, quoted by J. Baird Callicott, "Conceptual Resources for Environmental Ethics in Asian Traditions of thought: A Propaedeutic," *Philosophy East and West* 37 (1997): 121-122.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Watts, *Tao The Watercourse Way* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), p. 43.

“reflective of the concrete experience of life.”<sup>20</sup> Callicott characterizes Chung-ying Cheng’s description of the Chinese view as compatible with the new ecological model.

The metaphysical, if not causal, model emerging from the environmental sciences (ecology first and foremost) is remarkably similar to Cheng’s characterization of Chinese philosophy. From the viewpoint of ecology, the natural world is not, as represented in classical Western science, an aggregate of essentially independent entities; it is relationally unified. It remains, however, differentiated; its unity is that of an integrated system. To that extent, a metaphysical model of ecology is “holistic” and “organic.”<sup>21</sup>

Tucker shares Callicott’s certainty that Asian philosophy can serve as a model for reevaluating Western ecological ideals and that Taoism, in particular, can help humanity revise its relationship with nature. She states: “The Tao is the self-existent source of all things. . . . It is the unity behind the multiplicity of the manifest world. . . . The implications of this holistic cosmology for an environmental ethic should be somewhat self-evident. There is a distinct emphasis in Taoism on valuing nature for its own sake.”<sup>22</sup> Although few early Taoist documents have survived, essentially the *Tao te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu*, they contain numerous examples illustrating the connection of all entities.

Chuang Tzu commented on the absurdity of establishing arbitrary boundaries between essentially linked beings. He ridicules the artificial divisions employed by people; human-made distinctions, such as names, are irrelevant in the continuity of *tao*.

Everything is its own self; everything is something else’s other. Things do not know that they are the other things’ other; they only know that they are themselves. Thus it is said, the other thing arises out of the self, just as the self arises out of the other. This is the theory that self and other give rise to each other. . . . But really are there such distinctions as the self and the

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<sup>20</sup> Chung-ying Cheng, “Model of Causality in Chinese Philosophy: A Comparative Study,” *Philosophy East and West* 26 (1976): 12,18.

<sup>21</sup> Callicott, “Conceptual Resources,” p. 123.

<sup>22</sup> Tucker, *Worldviews*, pp. 153-54.

other, or are there no such distinctions? When the self and the other lose their contrariety, there we have the very essence of the Tao.<sup>23</sup>

In this theory of mutual arising, as Watts calls it, all things depend on each other for their identity; one cannot exist without the other. Chuang Tzu relates the following metaphor demonstrating the interdependence of all of reality: “The Penumbra asked the Shadow, saying ‘At one moment you move; at another you are at rest. At one moment you sit down; at another you stand up. Why this inconsistency of purpose?’ ‘Do I not have to depend upon something else,’ replied the Shadow, ‘for doing what I do? Does that something else not have to depend upon something else for doing what it does?’”<sup>24</sup>

Callicott restates the principle of mutual interdependence in a contemporary ecological context.

Biological diversity is complemented by ecosystemic integration, however. Each species is distinct from all others, but by no means does each exist in splendid isolation from the rest; all are integrated into ecosystems, and each distinct ecosystem is integrated into the global biosphere.<sup>25</sup>

In this context, he argues that the interaction of environmental influences acts as the creative initiator in biological systems. It is the mutual give and take between individuals that shapes the composition of the entire system. According to Callicott, Taoism is particularly consonant with the new evolutionary-ecological worldview. “Taoism could help environmentalists express the emergent order of nature, which is the outcome of a process of mutual adjustment among plants, animals, the earth, and the atmosphere over many millennia.”<sup>26</sup> He calls for a new outlook without sharp boundaries between entities,

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<sup>23</sup> Chuang Tzu, *Chuang Tzu, Sources of Chinese Tradition*, ed. and trans. by William Theodore De Bary, Wing-Tsit Chan, and Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 68-69.

<sup>24</sup> Chuang Tzu from De Bary, *Sources*, p. 73.

<sup>25</sup> Callicott, *Insights*, p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

especially between the self and the world. “Hence a nonanthropocentric environmental ethic, fully ecologized, so to speak, turns out to be a form of enlightened—or better, embedded—collective human self interest, after all.”<sup>27</sup>

It is Callicott’s belief that an Asianized human/nature attitude could help articulate a more empathetic environmental ethic. An environmental ethic in which all entities are seen as related and thus deserve the respect we grant ourselves. This respect should be based, not on a pragmatic self-interest, but an embedded self-interest concerned with the integrity of local bioregions as well as the biosphere.”<sup>28</sup> Callicott maintains that this view transcends Cartesian subject/object dualism and becomes a new intellectual common ground. “Though it grows directly out of the Western tradition of natural philosophy, its actual content is more Eastern than Western.”<sup>29</sup>

From this metaphysical bond Callicott extends the connection between ecology and Taoism to include findings from New Physics. He compares the interrelated unity of ecology to Fritjof Capra’s physics in the *Tao of Physics*: “Ecology and contemporary physics interestingly, complement one another conceptually and converge toward the same metaphysical notions.”<sup>30</sup> Callicott asserts that ecology has altered our perspective on nature from an atomistic, mechanistic attitude to a more integrated position. Consequently, this intrinsic bond can be viewed as the dynamic process of a unified whole in which the process holds as much (or more) importance as the participants.

Thus, in ecology, it is vital to examine the relationships among the members of a particular system in order to comprehend the whole. Most ecologists now accept that the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 208

<sup>28</sup> Callicott, *Insights*, p. 209.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> J. Baird Callicott, “The Metaphysical Implications of Ecology,” *Environmental Ethics* 8 (1986): 302.

dynamic links between individuals play a creative role within each system. Callicott, Capra, and others have characterized the energy linking the individuals in a system as similar to the Taoist concept of *ch'i*.

As in the energy field concept of physics, Callicott claims that the “individual organism, like an elemental particle is, as it were, a momentary configuration, a local perturbation, in an energy flux or ‘field.’”<sup>31</sup> The individual organism converges into the pattern of energy flow, “which is transferred from organism to organism. . . .Organisms are moments in this network, knots in the web of life.”<sup>32</sup> He claims that this scientific theory of energy flow within a natural system correlates strongly with the Chinese concept of *ch'i*, or “vital force.” The *Tao te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu*, represent *ch'i* as a continuous, dynamic, and holistic current of energy. “*Ch'i* moves and flows in all directions and in all manners. Its two elements (*yin* and *yang*) unite and give rise to the concrete. Thus the multiplicity of things and human beings are produced.”<sup>33</sup> It is through the collective movement of this vital force that Taoism achieves unity among the 10,000 things, the Taoist metaphor for all living entities. Current ecological thought posits that the same unifying process is present in the energy flow within natural systems. Callicott gives the following explanation.

The concept of nature emergent from the New Ecology, as that emergent from the New Physics, is holistic. It is impossible to conceive of organisms . . . apart from the field, the matrix of which they are modes . . . the conception of one thing in the New Physics and the New Ecology

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 310.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Chang Tsai quoted from Tu Wei-Ming, “The Continuity of Being: Chinese Visions of Nature,” in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Roger Ames (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1989), p. 73.

necessarily involves the conception of others and so on, until the entire system is implicated.”<sup>34</sup>

This conceptual likeness leads to the hypothesis that both of these energy flows may be viewed as the progression of a single process. Callicott points out that, although Capra equates the holism in New Physics to an Eastern worldview, he fails to differentiate between the numerous Eastern belief systems that may hold contrary, even contradictory, views. Nevertheless, Callicott supports Capra’s view that the holism in both Taoism and New Physics is observable and systemically related. Callicott states, “Since individual organisms, from an ecological point of view, are less discrete objects than modes of a continuous, albeit differentiated whole, the distinction between self and other is blurred.”<sup>35</sup> When compared to Chuang Tzu’s quotation about self and other, the correspondence between Callicott’s hypothesis and the Taoist principle is unmistakable.

Accentuating the importance of relationships is, in itself, a Taoist principle. The *Tao te Ching* demonstrates metaphorically that the character and identity of an entity are defined by its functional relationships.

Thirty spokes  
Share one hub  
Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand,  
And you will have the use of the cart.  
Knead clay in order to make a vessel.  
Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose at hand,  
And you will have the use of the vessel.  
Cut out doors and windows to make a room.  
Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose at hand,  
And you will have the use of the room.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Callicott, “Metaphysical Implications,” p. 311.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 313.

<sup>36</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, trans. D.C. Lau (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 15.

This passage clearly reveals that it is the juxtaposition of the spokes with the hub that gives the wheel its identity and purpose. Without their circularly spaced interrelationship, it would cease to be a wheel. Without the empty “bowl” of a vessel, it would cease to be a vessel. A room without an opening could never be a room, only a box. In Taoism, you “adapt the nothing therein” in order to establish the meaning and function of an entity. Arthur Waley’s translation of the same passage further clarifies this point: “And it is on these spaces where there is nothing that the usefulness of the house depends.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, in Taoism, as well as in ecology and physics, the relationships between particulars help determine their identity. Reiterating the Taoist premise in ecological terms, Callicott writes, “Ecosystem wholes are ‘logically prior’ to their component species because the nature of the part is determined by its relationship to the whole.”<sup>38</sup> He objects to general comparisons of this unity to all Eastern philosophies, especially Indian expressions of *Brahman*. “The wholes revealed by ecology and quantum theory are unified not blankly unitary; they are one more as organisms are one, than one as an indivisible, homogeneous, quality-less substance is one.”<sup>39</sup> Although Callicott concludes that the illusionary manifestations of *Brahman* may not be an appropriate example of this differentiated unity, he maintains that the manifestations of *tao* joined by the energy flow of *ch’i* are a metaphysical counterpart.

Thus, New Physics, ecology, and Taoist texts exhibit comparable viewpoints concerning the interconnectedness of entities, they all also accentuate the interrelationships of things as creative factors. Callicott, Tucker, Po-Keung Ip, and the

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<sup>37</sup> Arthur Waley, *The Way and Its Power* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 155.

<sup>38</sup> Callicott, “Metaphysical Implications,” p. 312.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.



other authors cited hold that the adoption of alternate conceptual abstracts could help define humanity's role within this dynamic matrix. The Eastern view, albeit not totally homogeneous in doctrines, generally presents a more unified picture of the human-nature relationship, than does the Western view. The aforementioned writers maintain that the unity of *Tao* (as well as other Taoist principles) should serve as a conceptual resource for a Western philosophy that has been mired in reductionist tradition. Callicott reiterates this potential.

One clear way that the East can help the West to understand and value nature is, therefore, by revealing certain premises and assumptions concerning the nature of nature and who we human beings are in relation to it, as well as the kind of knowledge of it that we seek to obtain which lie so deep within or which so pervade the Western world view that they may not come to light any other way. . . . If there indeed is a convergence of traditional Eastern philosophy and contemporary western science toward a common understanding of the nature of nature, then the East may help the West express its own new natural philosophy (together with its new natural values) in a vocabulary more accessible to a lay public than the arid formulae typical of Western Science. Eastern modes of thought, in short, may resonate with and thus complement and enrich the concepts of nature and values in nature recently emergent in the historical dialectic of Western ideas.<sup>40</sup>

## Section 2

### *Wu-Wei as Appropriate Technology*

#### *Wu-wei in Taoism*

There are numerous interpretations of the term *wu-wei*; one form, commonly accepted in moderate environmental thought, is *to work or act in accordance with nature*. Although strictly translated as inaction or non-action, most writers do not regard *wu-wei* as “without any action,” but as “acting without artificiality.” As Po-Keung Ip maintains,

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<sup>40</sup> Callicott and Ames, *Nature in Asian Traditions*, pp. 16-17.

“Insofar as ecological action is concerned, the Taoist recommendation is so simple that it almost amounts to a truism: act in accordance with nature.”<sup>41</sup>

If the principle of interconnectedness is presented metaphorically in the *Tao te Ching*, the principle of *wu-wei* is explicitly presented throughout the text. The author (or authors) wanted to ensure that no one missed this critical point. The principle of *wu-wei* epitomizes the qualities of non-assertion, nonviolence, taking the low position. In short, it represents action that is complementary to, rather than contrary to, nature. “Do that which consists in taking no action, and order will prevail”(chap. 3). The interpretation of “no action” in this instance is “no artificial or unnatural action;” take only those actions that are consistent with *Tao*. Several renowned examples of *wu-wei* in the *Tao te Ching* concern the correct governing of the state by a sage or wise ruler.

Governing a state is like boiling a small fish.  
When the empire is ruled in accordance with the way  
The Spirits lose their potencies.

Whoever does anything to it will ruin it; whoever lays hold of it will lose it.  
Therefore the sage, because he does nothing, never ruins anything;  
And because he does not lay hold of anything, loses nothing.<sup>42</sup>

In brief, do only what needs to be done and no more. In chapter 9, the *Tao te Ching* tells us that “it is better to have stopped in time,” than to “overdo.” Filling a vessel too full, causes waste; stretching a bow too far, breaks it; and hammering a blade too long will ruin it instead of sharpening it. “Hammer it to a point, And the sharpness will be preserved forever. . . . To retire when the task is accomplished is the way of Heaven.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Po-Keung Ip, “Taoism and the Foundations of Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 5 (1983): 340.

<sup>42</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, pp. 121, 125.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

The *Chuang Tzu* illustrates another aspect of *wu-wei*, namely, that observation and experience results in an intuitive grasp of the appropriate action. It relates the following story. As Prince Wen-hui's cook cut up a large piece of meat, every motion harmonized, following the natural grain of the meat, therefore causing no waste or awkwardness. Because of his experience, his blade never needs sharpening. The cook says, "My skill now is such that my chopper never touches even the smallest tendon or ligament, let alone the great bones. . . . Now my chopper has been in use for nineteen years; yet its edge is as sharp as if it just came from the whetstone."<sup>44</sup> This analogy demonstrates that knowledge of the appropriate action comes from observing the natural character of the participants and adapting one's actions to that character. It is these two aspects of *wu-wei* that have caught the attention of mainstream environmental authors: (1) act in accordance with nature, and (2) knowledge of proper action comes from observation and experience.

In the next section, I examine works by several mainstream authors that demonstrate this interest. They claim that through the principle of *wu-wei*, humans can learn to adjust their environmental actions to work within the natural character of their surroundings. Thus, by observing the natural proclivities of their surroundings, humans perhaps can find solutions for environmental problems that not only do not oppose their natural leanings but actually work with them.

#### *Wu-wei in Mainstream Environmental Literature*

As society contends with its interreliance on its surroundings, the ways in which it responds to nature must also be modified. The Judeo-Christian portrayal of man as

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<sup>44</sup> Chuang Tzu, *Chuang Tzu*, quoted from De Bary, *Sources*, p. 74.

dominating nature has yielded, at least in environmentalist thinking, to one of naturalistic coexistence. People have learned that more power is not always the best solution to a problem. Again Madison Avenue provides an illustration. A recent commercial depicts a squadron of SWAT team members, helicopters, and armored vehicles coming to the rescue of a cat stranded in a tree. They are prepared to either blow up or knock down the tree to rescue the cat (while toppling chimneys and destroying other landscape).

Meanwhile, a bewildered bystander asks the commander in charge, “Wouldn’t it be easier to just use a ladder?” The punchline of the ad is “Just because you have the power, doesn’t mean you have to use it.” In this case, using a ladder is an example of appropriate technology for the situation versus the technological overkill so often employed in modern times.

Using a ladder to rescue the cat would be considered *wu-wei* – “to act in accord with nature”—the use of appropriately gauged actions that work with nature, not against it. The notion of acting with nature has gained acceptance, not only in environmental circles, but in the general population as well. In its “Declaration Toward a Global Ethic,” the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions criticized the use of dominance over nature, while praising behaviors that nurture life and advance interdependence. It specifically commended the “Oriental approach which, in general tends to de-center the role of the human.”<sup>45</sup> Taoism, in particular, is touted as advocating a less adversarial and less self-interested approach than do Western traditions. The declaration acknowledges that in

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<sup>45</sup> Pamela Smith, *What Are They Saying About Environmental Ethics?* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1997), pp. 67-68.

Taoist thinking, nature is regarded as possessing worth, or value, “for its own sake,” and human interference should be minimal, if not nil.<sup>46</sup>

Mary Evelyn Tucker explains the Taoist principle of *wu-wei* as “that which is understated, not forceful or directive . . . excess, extravagance, and arrogance are to be avoided.”<sup>47</sup> She asserts that, in Taoism, strength is presented as a yielding to the natural movement of all things. Tucker offers the martial art of judo as a physical illustration of this principle. In judo, one uses the force and weight of his or her opponents to subdue them; by yielding to their attack, one is able to turn the opponent’s energy to an advantage. She contends that the same principle may be employed when dealing with nature; human actions should work with the powerful tendencies of their environment in order to achieve maximum result with minimum effort.

To cooperate with nature in a Taoist manner requires a better understanding of and an appreciation for nature’s processes. While an extreme Taoist position might advocate complete noninterference with nature, a more moderate Taoist approach would call for interaction with nature in a far less exploitive manner. Such cooperation with nature would sanction the use of appropriate or intermediate technology when necessary and would favor the use of organic fertilizers and natural farming methods. . . . Clearly, a Taoist ecological position is one with significant potential in the contemporary world.<sup>48</sup>

As with Po-Keung Ip, Tucker rejects the translation of *wu-wei* as complete passivity in favor of correct or appropriate force. This interpretation involves taking the proper steps at the right time, corresponding with the predispositions of the surroundings. She claims that Taoist teachings advocate the utilization of natural processes, or *Tao*, to achieve a desired result. Russell Goodman supports this claim with a quote by Hui Nan

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>47</sup> Tucker and Grimm, *Worldviews*, p. 154.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 155-56.

Tzu, an early Taoist: ““He who conforms to the course of *Tao*, following the natural processes of Heaven and Earth, finds it easy to manage the whole world. Thus, it was that Yu the Great was able to engineer the canals by following the nature of water as his guide.””<sup>49</sup> Goodman asserts that appropriate technology, together with acute observation, allows humanity to be “neither completely dominated by natural forces nor enslaved by them.”<sup>50</sup> He specifies environmentally friendly practices—organic farming, recycling, non-toxic pest control, non-assertive forest management, and passive solar energy—as instances of respecting nature (*wu-wei*) while also considering the needs of society.

Callicott reaffirms Goodman’s conclusions in *Earth’s Insights*: “Taoism is said to provide a philosophical foundation and rationale for what is known in the environmental literature as an appropriate technology.” Callicott defines this technology as “technology that blends with and harnesses natural forces, as opposed to technology that resists and attempts to dominate and reorganize nature.”<sup>51</sup> He agrees that Taoists did not reject technology *in toto*, only those facets of it that went against the nature of things—actions that ignored natural cycles or proclivities.<sup>52</sup> He characterizes *wu-wei* as neither coercive nor assertive, but an action that comes from one’s own *te* and the respect of one’s neighboring *tes*. He contrasts it with *yu-wei* (actions not taking natural leanings into consideration), as the use of risky technology, while expending a great deal of capital and labor.

Wind generated electricity, solar space heating, commuting by bicycle, and the like are *wu-wei*. The capital intensive Green Revolution approach of increasing yields per acre to feed growing population is *yu-wei*. Land reform combined with creative improvements in diversified peasant

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<sup>49</sup> Goodman, “Taoism,” p. 75.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>51</sup> Callicott, *Insights*, p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> Callicott, “Conceptual Resources,” p. 125.

subsistence agriculture and family planning –to achieve a balance between increased productivity and decreased demand –is wu-wei. And so on.<sup>53</sup>

One way of achieving *wu-wei* is to act both precipitously and preventively. A problem is solved more efficiently when addressed at its onset. The *Tao te Ching* suggests taking the correct action while the difficulty is small, or better yet, dealing with the situation before it becomes a problem.

It is easy to maintain a situation while it is still secure;  
It is easy to deal with a situation before symptoms develop;  
It is easy to dissolve a thing when it is yet minute,  
Deal with a thing while it is still nothing;  
Keep a thing in order before disorder sets in.<sup>54</sup>

Po-Keung Ip sees this advice as advocating positive, necessary action in keeping with the *Tao*. He asserts that *wu-wei*, acting in accordance with nature, is “exactly the kind of metaphysical grounding that an environmental ethic needs.”<sup>55</sup>

Chung-ying Cheng has also commented on the applicability of *wu-wei* to modern ecological problems. In his opinion, this translates into “whatever produces maximum effect by minimum effort in human activity manifests natural spontaneity” (*tzu-jan*).<sup>56</sup> *Tao* and *wu-wei* would then become essential as conceptual restraints in humanity’s pursuit of science and technology.

Without an understanding of the *Tao* it is indeed possible that knowledge and civilization, science and technology, will doom man to self-slavery and self-destruction. Man simply falls into the bondage of his own conceptual prison and becomes a victim of his own desires. The Taoist criticism of *wu-wei* is supposed to awaken man to self-examination and self-doubt; in this way man is awakened to a quest for self-surpassing and

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<sup>53</sup> Callicott, *Insights*, p. 73.

<sup>54</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, p. 125.

<sup>55</sup> Po-Keung Ip, “Taoism,” p. 41.

<sup>56</sup> Chung-ying Cheng, “On the Environmental Ethics of the *Tao* and the *Ch’i*,” *Environmental Ethics* 8 (1986): 357.

self-overcoming in an understanding of the totality of reality and its secret of creativity through wu-wei and reversion.<sup>57</sup>

Chung-ying Cheng claims that, because humans are a part of *Tao*, their intellect is part of *Tao* as well. Therefore, the conflict between technology and nature can be resolved by the joining of both these components of knowledge. This enlightened factual knowledge is called *hsi-ming*, “hidden light,” by Lao Tzu, and *liang-hsing*, “parallel understanding,” by Chuang Tzu.<sup>58</sup> According to Chung-ying Cheng, dual awareness could become the main principle governing both ecology and environmental ethics. Through such an enlightened understanding of *tao*, humanity would be able to “transform the artificiality and unnaturalness of knowledge and civilization, science and technology, into the spontaneity and naturalness of *Tao*.”<sup>59</sup> He explains further:

With this awakening, man can still proceed with his knowledge and civilization, science and technology, if he is to neutralize and temper his intellectual and intellectualistic efforts with a sense of the *Tao*. . . . They can be seen as enhancing rather than obstructing, complementing rather than opposing, the actual spontaneity and harmony of the creativity of *Tao*.<sup>60</sup>

### *Section 3*

#### *Emergent Theory and the Creative Character of Te*

##### *Te in Taoist Literature*

Po-Keung Ip proposes that change and transformation, as presented in the action of reversal, is a crucial function of *Tao*. Although early interpretations of reversal depicted it as a repetitious cycle, recent explanations have stressed its transformative and creative qualities. “There is also a dynamic side of *Tao*. . . . *Tao* is also depicted as a

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<sup>57</sup> Cheng, “*Tao*,” pp. 357-58.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 359.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 358.



process of change and transformation. In fact, everything in the universe is the result of self—and mutual—transformations. . . . This relationship is best understood if we understand the meaning of the *te* in *Tao*. *Te* signifies the potency, the power of *Tao* that nourishes, sustains, and transforms beings.”<sup>61</sup> If *tao* is the overarching unity displayed in the natural world, then *te* is best understood as the transformative and creative element within individual entities. “Te then is the transforming content and disposition of an existent; an autogenerative, self construed ‘arising.’”<sup>62</sup> The 10,000 things may be born of *Tao*, but they are sculpted and sustained by *te*.

Tao engenders them  
And te nourishes and rears them.  
Things give them shape  
And conditions bring them to completion.  
Thus, all of the myriad things revere tao and honor te.  
Why tao is revered and te honored  
Is because they are constantly “self-so-ing (tzu-jan)”  
And not because of anyone’s mandate.<sup>63</sup>

The individual’s basic direction may be innate, but interaction with other individuals and environmental factors shape the eventual result. The creative principle of *te* embodies potentiality, but only in regard to the potential for diversification. Roger Ames explains the influence of *te* as the “unfolding of a *sui generis* focus of potency that embraces and determines conditions within the range and parameters of its particularity.”<sup>64</sup> There are numerous variations within these limitations; thus, within the milieu of other individuals, mutual arising is made possible. In effect, each individual helps create and define

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 358-59.

<sup>61</sup> Po-Keung Ip, “Taoism,” p. 339.

<sup>62</sup> Roger T. Ames, “Putting Te Back into Taoism,” from Callicott and Ames, *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*, p. 125.

<sup>63</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, quoted from Callicott and Ames, *Nature in Asian Traditions*, p. 127.

<sup>64</sup> Ames, “Putting Te Back into Taoism,” p. 125.

surrounding individuals, as the individual entity is created and defined by them. Ames cites Chuang Tzu on the importance of *te*.

*Tao* is the opening out and arraying of *te*: the process of living and growing (*sheng*) is the radiation of *te*. Activity that issues from what is inevitable is called *te*: activity that is entirely self expressive is called appropriate order (*chih*). . . . By definition, inevitable activity and self expressive activity seem to be contraries, but in fact, they are mutually consistent.<sup>65</sup>

The interplay between the individual, *te*, and its dynamic association with other individuals and the environment, *ch'i*, may appear to be contradictory but is actually complementary. The intermingling of the innate energy of the individual, in concert with creative interaction with other factors, is another aspect of Taoism that interests environmental writers.

#### *Te in Environmental Literature*

Together with the paradigm shift from reductionism to inter-relatedness, the notion of equilibrium, or “the balance of nature,” has also been reevaluated. The equilibrium paradigm emphasized the stability of ecological systems; this model proposed that ecosystems could achieve a static climax stage through the process of succession. The equilibrium paradigm represented ecosystems as “functionally and structurally complete in and of themselves; they could be thought to be self-regulating.”<sup>66</sup> This ideal, although sustainable in some situations, is no longer considered the norm for all ecological systems. Palpable evidence exists of multiple persistent states, as well as multiple pathways of vegetative changes. The “nonequilibrium paradigm” regards natural systems as open, dynamic, and vitally embedded within the context of their

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<sup>65</sup> Chuang Tzu, quoted from Ames, “Putting Te Back into Taoism,” p. 126.

surroundings. This vibrant description of nature required a more accurate metaphor; consequently, the “flux of nature” replaced the static “balance of nature” ideal.

For environmental authors Chung-ying Cheng, Roger T. Ames, and J. Baird Callicott, the Taoist principles of *te* and *ch'i* serve as conceptual models for the contemporary paradigm's active contextualism. Chung-ying Cheng describes the Chinese view of nature as *sheng-sheng-pu-yi*, “the incessant activity of life creativity.” In his opinion, the foundation of this approach is its “focus on the internal relation of man to his surroundings based upon an integrative interdependence and a harmony between man and the world.”<sup>67</sup> They view nature as a dynamic process without a singular chain of causality.

There is always a many-to-many relationship between cause and effect . . . when embedded in the contexts of Chinese philosophy and Chinese cultural consciousness the “world of surroundings” does not simply denote individual things as entities in a microscopic structure; it also connotes a many layered reality such as heaven and earth in a macroscopic enfoldment. This “world of surroundings” is generally conceived as something not static but dynamic.<sup>68</sup>

Of Chung-ying Cheng's four maxims for a metaphysics of the environment, three involve the dynamic and creative aspects of interrelation:

- (1) The axiom of Self-Transformation. The *Tao*, or reality as the *Tao*, presents in a process of temporal, spatial, material, immaterial, and relational transformations. There is no simple linear relation of cause and effect, but a manifold of levels and dimensions in organic relation.
- (2) The axiom of creative spontaneity. The creativity of reality consists in a natural process toward the emergence of life.
- (3) The action of Interpenetration. All elements in nature are interdependent, interacting, and interpenetrating. There can be no real separation among them. Hence, there is the effect of the whole on the part and the effect of the

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<sup>66</sup> Steward T.A. Pickett, V. Thomas Parker, and Peggy L. Fiedler, “The New Paradigm in Ecology: Implications for Conservation Biology above the Species Level,” *Conservation Biology*, ed. Peggy L. Fiedler and Subodh K. Jain (New York: Chapman and Hall, 1997), p. 67.

<sup>67</sup> Chung-ying Cheng, “Tao,” p. 353.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

part on the whole. No life process or creative effort can be achieved without taking into consideration the interpenetrating relationships of things.<sup>69</sup>

Chung-ying Cheng considers Taoism an ecologically friendly perspective that corresponds directly to contemporary environmental theory. It is his opinion that “each axiom generates important consequences for environmental ethics and together they provide a necessary foundation for environmental ethics.”<sup>70</sup>

Callicott also stresses the creative aspect of Chinese thought, especially in Taoism, from an environmental standpoint. In his opinion, Taoism is more compatible with the contemporary explanation of natural systems development than the traditional Western stance. He compares the framework of the two metaphysics. The “top down” order of Plato's Forms and Heraclitus' Logos treated matter as a passive, receptive substance on which order is imposed, whereas Chinese thought “tends toward the ‘aesthetic’ or ‘emergent.’”<sup>71</sup> Callicott characterizes the Chinese view as building from the bottom up. It is an arising from “the mutual adjustment of many natural forces and processes, among which conflicts and tensions are resolved and accommodations worked out to achieve a synergistic whole.”<sup>72</sup> He provides two examples of this synergistic process. The first refers to cooking a stew without a recipe, in which “each ingredient is enhanced by virtue of its relationship to the others.” The second example refers to the unstructured formation of African-American jazz, in which the seemingly random individual play of the instruments merges into a spontaneous harmony.

In this concept of “aesthetic order,” Taoism is particularly consonant with the contemporary evolutionary-ecological worldview, in which the incredibly rich and detailed order of terrestrial nature is emergent, not

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 368.

<sup>70</sup> Chung-ying Cheng, “Tao,” p. 351.

<sup>71</sup> Callicott, *Insights*, p. 70.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

designed. The earth sciences do not conform to hypothetical-deductive-experimental-predictive model epitomized by classical physics. . . . Taoism could help environmentalists express the emergent order of nature, which is the outcome of a process of mutual adjustment among plants, animals, the earth, and the atmosphere over many millennia.<sup>73</sup>

Taoism portrays nature as a vital process of reciprocal modification and accommodation. In the Taoist viewpoint, individual forces combine to form a creative energy that is intrinsic to the process itself. Through the jazz example, Callicott exemplifies the significance of *te* in this blending of individuals. He characterizes *te* as the “disposition of a particular -dynamic, of course, not static- being,” He writes,

In our jazz, the drums and the drummer, the bass and the bass player each has its *te*. The harmony that is the Tao arises as each particular, with its particular *te*, comes into being—in the context of what has gone before—and asserts itself in relation to, and in response to all the others, near and far.<sup>74</sup>

In “Putting the Te Back into Taoism,” Ames expresses the same opinion regarding the aesthetic nature of Chinese thought. Ames describes the Taoist model as more complex than logical construction, given that it is without preassigned pattern. He asserts that the unilinear structure of logical development is “one-sided, because it fails to account for the whole range of possibility in which progress constitutes but one of several dominant configurations.”<sup>75</sup> The openness of the Chinese aesthetic model results in a unique arrangement generated by the particulars and their relationships. According to Ames, “The organization and order of existence emerges out of the spontaneous arrangement of the participants.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>75</sup> Ames, “Putting Te Back into Taoism,” in Callicott and Ames, *Nature in Asian Traditions*, p. 117.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

Ames argues that the concept of *te* has been underrated in our present understanding of Taoist tradition. He defines the term as “the arising of the particular in a process vision of existence . . . characterized by an inherent dynamicism . . . which interprets the world.”<sup>77</sup> *Te* embodies the individual’s latent potential for diversification, containing the possible directions of the developing individual that harmonize with other environing particulars.

All existence is a continuum on which every aspect is undergoing a constant process of transformation determined by its own disposition and the matrix of conditions which sponsor it. The particular is not understood in terms of discrete and essentialistic self nature; rather, it is an open focus in the process of existence which shrinks and swells, depending on how it is interpreted and construed. When disclosing its uniqueness and difference, it is apprehended as a particular *te*; when considered in terms of its determining conditions, it constitutes its own whole.<sup>78</sup>

For Ames, Taoist thought depicts the course of nature as following an aesthetic order rather than a scientific one. Nature is “a harmony consequent upon the collaboration of intrinsically related particulars as it is perceived from some particular perspective.”<sup>79</sup> It does not adhere to rigid principles or laws; the *tes* of the particulars in each circumstance spontaneously generate the whole.

Particular *te* are described, like *tao*, as *tzu-jan*, “self-evidencing.” This means that they are self-disclosing within the conditions of their unique contexts, and cannot be explained fully by appeal to principles independent of them.<sup>80</sup>

The creative process ensures the distinctness of the composition, yet “there is a harmonious order, a regularity, a pattern achieved in the process of existence that is empirically evident and which brings unity to diversity. . . . *Te*, when seen as a particular

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

focus or event in the *tao*, is a principle of individuation; when seen as a holograph of this underlying harmony, diffusing in all directions in coloration of the whole it is a principle of integration.<sup>81</sup> Change and transformation, based on the reciprocal development of individual *tes*, become the underlying unity with the process. The boundaries between individuals dissipate, thus allowing their self-evidencing to form a unique entirety—a mutually generated and spontaneously created arising.

According to Ames, this transformational process is the source of nature's emergent power; the flux is not overcome, but becomes the grounds for creativity. He claims that both the contemporary paradigm and the teachings of Taoism emphasize the following principle: flux is an integral component of nature; thus, there should be limits to the scientific and technological manipulation of change. Fixed rules and principles governing every foreseeable problem are an anthropocentric illusion. Ames cites Lynn White, Jr., on the practicality of the present scientific course: "More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion or rethink our old one."<sup>82</sup>

Pickett, Parker, and Fielder state that emergent creativity is considered a natural and essential process in systems evolution. They include limited human intrusion as part of the flux and disturbance of this open system. "Human-generated changes must be constrained because nature has functional, historical, and evolutionary limits. Nature has a range of ways to be, but there is a limit to those ways, and therefore human changes must be within those limits."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>83</sup> Pickett, Parker, and Fielder, "New Paradigm," p. 82.

Because of these ecological findings, the Taoist principle of working with natural change has gained appeal to environmentalists as a way to interact with nature. Ames concludes with the proposal that a Taoist interpretation of the flux of nature model could prove valuable as an environmental ethic.

Another point of reflection is the consequence of accepting the Taoist conception of transformation. That is, all of the manifold particulars in existence are ongoing participants in the process of change. Continuity and diversity are valued, but any notion of permanence is rejected as a misconception of the nature of reality. For better or worse, the principles of conservation, to the extent that they are antagonistic to change, require rethinking. If the quality of the environment can justify it, massive transformation is not necessarily unacceptable.<sup>84</sup>

### *Criticisms*

#### *Criticisms of Taoist references in Mainstream Environmental Literature*

When authors such as J. Baird Callicott, Chung-ying Cheng, Po-Keung Ip, and Roger T. Ames published their respective works supporting an “Asianized” approach for ecology, others pointed out the problems inherent in their position. While the supporters of this stance maintained that Taoist principles were harmonious with the contemporary paradigm, their critics raised numerous objections as to their applicability. These objections include the following concerns:

1. The transference of Eastern modes of thought to Western ideology
2. The comparison of pre-industrial agrarian cultures to modern society
3. The blending of scientific and religious principles
4. The lack of specific behavioral guidelines

Holmes Rolston, III, was among the first to critique the Asian perspective. He concedes that early Taoists “did seem to describe causal forces in natural history . . . and

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<sup>84</sup> Ames, “Putting Te Back into Taoism,” p. 143.



seem to offer a model for ecosystems, for evolutionary theory, and even for cosmology.”<sup>85</sup> However, he concludes that we cannot presume any such insight. He takes particular exception to a supposed correspondence between Eastern metaphysical terminology and principles of modern science.

Western scientists and theologians both know that one ought to mix religion and science with great logical care. . . . Religion and Science, some say, speak two different languages, and to confuse the two is to make a category mistake. . . . To take a Taoist example, it is a category mistake to think that *yin* and *yang* suggest anything for biology and physics. . . . The vital force, *ch'i*, the principle of harmony, should not lead Taoists to prefer an ecological theory that emphasizes harmony and cooperation and to dislike a theory that is more mechanistic, conflict prone, or pluralistic, or that (as recent ecological theory has often done) deemphasizes equilibrium.<sup>86</sup>

Rolston does credit Taoism and other value-laden philosophies with being catalysts in questioning science’s presumed value-neutral stance. It is his opinion that science possesses a loaded metaphysical agenda that may or may not be compatible with other philosophies. In this instance, Taoism may help to expose scientific theories as having a rationalistic bias, which could, in fact, impart valuations.<sup>87</sup> “So it might be that an Eastern model of nature can critique the metaphysical assumptions in evolutionary ecoscience and in technological science and thereby help the West to value nature.”<sup>88</sup>

Another of Rolston’s objections is to the assertion that Taoist concepts correspond to contemporary scientific principles. He cites the distrust of technology throughout Taoist texts as evidence of an observable anti-scientific attitude. The *Tao te Ching* contains phrases such as “Exterminate learning and there will no longer be worries” and

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<sup>85</sup> Holmes Rolston, III, “Can the East Help the West to Value Nature?,” *Philosophy East and West* 37 (1987): 173.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

“in governing the people the sage empties their minds. . . . He always keeps them innocent of knowledge.”<sup>89</sup> Although these quotations are open to varying interpretations, they display a patent aversion to intellectual pursuits. Thus, in Rolston’s opinion, any attempt to link Taoist language to modern scientific principles must address the doubt that such an approach fails to represent an accurate rendering of Taoism’s beliefs and concepts.

In addition, Rolston voices reservations about the exportation of belief systems or concepts from one culture to another. According to him, it is a dubious undertaking to borrow concepts indigenous to one society’s belief system and apply them directly to another society. He states, “It is difficult to tear a practice out of the world view in which it is set, and what works in an Eastern climate might not work in Western culture because a particular conduct cannot be sustained without the metaphysics that back it.”<sup>90</sup> Rolston maintains that the use of Taoism as a conceptual pool for the West presents many obstacles; he offers the inherent dynamicism of *yin/yang* as an example. Rolston holds that the Taoist tenet of *yin/yang* is not valuable to the West as either a scientific principle or as a metaphysical model because of its culturally embedded meaning.

In either case (the parascientific Tao, or the transphenomenal Tao), when a Westerner tries to import this view, there are problems. Employed so extensively, the Tao conflates many things, that outside of the pervasive influence of its paradigm, have no otherwise discoverable connection with each other in nature, none so far as the sciences that are said to be congenial with it have yet revealed.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*,” pp. 59, 76.

<sup>90</sup> Rolston, “Value Nature,” p. 174.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

However, according to Rolston, one aspect of *tao* is valuable to the West—its use as a “prescription for human conduct.”<sup>92</sup> He concedes that the model of appropriate balance may be a saner one than the Western metaphysics of exploitation.

The West needs to import a stable metaphysics to match the realities of the carrying capacities of the ecosystems that support culture. Operating for many centuries in classical China, Taoists knew the meaning of the life of balance. Their model can be instructive.<sup>93</sup>

However, even this mild endorsement comes with a disclaimer. Rolston views the Taoist perspective more as an informing vision than any “blueprint for action.” Given the cryptic nature of the Taoist texts and the varied interpretations of their contents, he holds that the vision is “too nondiscriminating to be operational.”<sup>94</sup> It is his contention that Taoism’s directives are too ambiguous to be of any pragmatic value for modern environmental problems. According to Rolston, Taoist myth may have contained appropriate recommendations for a rural, medieval culture, but it must be demythologized to be of any value to us. “The advice is sound enough, but unless one has a more sophisticated model . . . or unless one can work the new attitude into either policy regulations or the moral calculus, nothing comes of it.”<sup>95</sup> Rolston concludes that the blending of Eastern ideals with Western environmental ethics into a synergistic stew (to continue the Taoist metaphor) makes for an unpalatable dish. For him, the tenet of *wu-wei*, although ideologically appealing, gives little pragmatic instruction; it acts only as a maxim or slogan to set a mood, not as a strategy for guiding action.

The West awaits arguments and creative solutions that, without requiring a conversion to Buddhism, Taoism, or Hinduism, it can borrow and use as catalysts to illuminate the complexities of evolutionary ecoscience, to

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

criticize its own evaluations of nature, and to make decisions before the environmental tradeoffs it faces. My own judgement is that the East needs considerable reformulation of its sources before it can preach much to the West.<sup>96</sup>

Deborah Bird also condemns the wholesale practice of what she perceives to be the transplanting of values from one society to another. Bird views this practice as a misguided attempt to romanticize and glorify other cultures' ideologies. Although she targets all comparative environmentalists, it is most applicable to early writers like Lynn White, Jr., whereas writers such as Callicott and Ames are careful not to endorse the blanket acceptance of all aspects of Eastern philosophies. Bird maintains that this endeavor is inevitably doomed because, "every culture is a product of particular beings living particular lives within the particular opinions and constraints of their own received traditions."<sup>97</sup>

The attempt to appropriate another culture's ethical system is self-defeating because it is self-contradictory: the act of appropriation is so lacking in respect which is the basis of the desired ethic that the appropriation becomes annihilation.<sup>98</sup>

Gerald Larson criticizes the appropriation of Eastern philosophy by environmental writers. He challenges Callicott's general hypothesis that Eastern philosophies (including Taoism) can offer environmental ethics any workable conceptual resources. "Such an effort would have a serious impact on the environmental crisis."<sup>99</sup> He contrasts the mining of Asian conceptual resources to the acquisition of raw materials—although both may be imported, only the latter could be of any genuine value to the West.

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<sup>96</sup> Rolston, "Value Nature," p. 189.

<sup>97</sup> Bird, quoted from Callicott, *Earth's Insights*, p. 192.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

What is methodologically loaded and seriously misleading about such an economic metaphor of raw materials is the corollary component of such a metaphor, namely that we are not interested in the raw materials in their natural state. We want, rather, to appropriate the raw materials so that we can use them for making what we want. We all know full well that the “ideas” and/or the “concepts” that we need are not available directly in Asian contexts. They are deeply embedded in cultural frames, kinship systems, traditional institutional frameworks, and so forth, from which they must be detached or “dug out” as it were and then imported into our own frameworks. . . . Such a method for comparative philosophy is, in my view, one-dimensional, overly selective, forced, anachronistic, socially unsophisticated, and, perhaps worst of all, unpersuasive.<sup>100</sup>

It is not only the misappropriation of Eastern philosophy that disturbs Larson, he objects to philosophy of any sort in dealing with the environmental crisis. He suggests that philosophy is part of the problem. “Such visions may provide solace or salvation or ‘release’ from the issues . . . but they tend to be either question-begging alternatives to dealing with the environmental crisis or else . . . themselves symptomatic of the crisis.”<sup>101</sup> He seems particularly resistant to Asian philosophical concepts, calling their use the “fallacy of disembedded ideas.” In the final analysis, he rejects the proposal that concepts such as *Tao*, *Brahman-atman*, and *dharma* can be “disembedded, dusted off, and somehow utilized in dealing with the environmental crisis.”<sup>102</sup>

### *Conclusions*

Those authors who defend the Asian influence on environmental ethics have answered their critics in turn. Concerning Bird’s warning against the attempt to transplant another culture’s ethical system, Callicott responds in *Earth’s Insights*. He asserts that his comparative dialogue approach is in no way a transplantation of values,

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<sup>99</sup> Gerald James Larson, “‘Conceptual Resources’ in South Asia for Environmental Ethics or ‘The Fly is Still Alive and Well in the Bottle,’” *Philosophy East and West* 37 (1987): 154.

<sup>100</sup> Larson, “South Asia,” pp. 152-53.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

but an anticipation of a “global intellectual dialogue, synthesis, and amalgamation.”<sup>103</sup> He proposes a global ethic drawing on universal concepts versus Western philosophical dominance or “just as bad, intellectual balkanization.”

The “act of appropriation” is on the face of it an indication of respect rather than disrespect—imitation being the sincerest form of flattery. Neither are things debased when they are shared. Again, quite the contrary: favorable comparison with the emerging postmodern scientific worldview—which is what this study attempts—validates traditional and indigenous intellectual achievements.<sup>104</sup>

Callicott also counters Larson’s charge that the conceptual mining of ideas and concepts is a “reprehensible kind of philosophical colonialism.” He disputes Larson’s charge of intellectual piracy stating that it is not stealing the discourse of others to seek a “mutually enriching fair trade in ideas—East and West, North and South.” Callicott claims that “things of the mind are not diminished when they are shared.”<sup>105</sup>

Michael Barnhart has also responded to the objections; he answers many of Rolston’s criticisms, including the lack of specific guidelines in Taoism. Barnhart states he understands Rolston’s assessment because Asian models of ethics do not easily fit into Rolston’s model of ethical behavior. He describes Rolston’s model as a “form of normative operationalism”—rights based systems that feature “universal, or at least widely applicable, principles.”<sup>106</sup> However, he counters that laws or rules are not the only effective system of ethics or the most important components of good judgement.

Buddhist, or even Taoist compassionate engagement with the world (including the worlds of human nature and natural nature) is normatively operational on its own terms, even though such terms may not yield storable decision procedures for rendering judgements in hard cases of

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>103</sup> Callicott, *Insights*, p. 192.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Michael Barnhart, “Ideas of Nature in an Asian Context,” *Philosophy East and West* 47 (1997): 426.

environmental conflict resolution. That is they may give us the ability to judge wisely without yielding knowledge about that ability specifically.<sup>107</sup>

*Wu-wei* resists the rigidity of laws; it is *wu-tse* (non-law) which, although observable, is not capable of being universalized. Although the concept of *wu-wei* fails to offer universal guidelines for specific environmental problems, it does convey a certain approach or perspective. All Chinese scholars may not accept the interpretation of *wu-wei* as “appropriate technology,” but most would agree that incorporating *wu-wei* into ecological perspective would engender a compassionate relationship with nature.

Ames responds to Bird’s criticism of transplanting Asian concepts into Western culture without their cultural context as in Lynn White’s comparison with Buddhism. Ames defends the blending of concepts in order to enrich our own beliefs, but he also rejects the possibility of any mass conversion to Taoism. Although Eastern concepts may help “clarify our assumptions,” Ames agrees that Western society can understand borrowed ideas only through its own point of view.

Certainly, we cannot escape the problems of having to understand these insights through the medium of our own culture, but if they are to transform us in any way at all, they must be meaningful to us. From what has been said above . . . the need to transform these ideas to make them appropriate to our own circumstances is entirely consistent with this Taoist tradition.<sup>108</sup>

The West’s dearth of suitable metaphors for the contemporary paradigm calls for exploration of other cultures. Callicott expresses this as a problem of trying to convey the concepts of the new postmodern scientific worldview in the language of the old.

The articulation and dissemination of something so general, multifaceted, and fundamental as a new picture of nature, human nature, and the relationship between the two cannot be effected by a few able writers. . . .

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ames, “Putting Te Back into Taoism,” p. 141.

Indigenous worldviews around the globe can contribute a world of symbols, images, metaphors, similes, analogies, stories and myths to advance the process of articulating the new postmodern scientific worldview.<sup>109</sup>

If Callicott is correct that “traditional metaphysics and moral theory are more at the root of environmental problems than tools for their solution,”<sup>110</sup> then the search for a more descriptive and relevant paradigm is not only justifiable, but essential. The anthropomorphism and linearity of rational thought is not only incompatible with the new perspective, but is also inconsistent with many of its principles. The metaphors of Taoist literature may provide a conceptual bridge for the understanding of these new ideas in mainstream society. The criticism that these concepts lack their contextual milieu fails to diminish their value as an aid to this understanding. Western philosophy has no choice but to modify the concepts of other cultural systems to fit into its own understanding; however, if the essence of the ideology remains intact, it is not a disservice to the appropriated concepts or the contributing culture.

No one is encouraging the West to denounce prior beliefs in favor of Taoism or any other Eastern religion, but it can be argued that there is positive value in Taoist imagery as a tool to grasp novel ecological insights. There is an unmistakable challenge in the Taoist placement of humanity within the boundaries of nature. As Chung-ying Cheng states, “Man has to naturalize man as well as to humanize nature.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Callicott, *Insights*, pp. 191-192.

<sup>110</sup> Callicott and Ames, *Nature in Asian Traditions*, p. 1.

<sup>111</sup> Chung-ying Cheng, “Tao,” p. 355.



## CHAPTER 2

### DEEP ECOLOGY AND TAOIST THOUGHT

The basis for many of deep ecology principles can be found in Taoism. According to Richard Sylvan and David Bennett, there is a remarkable convergence of themes between the two philosophies. They suggest that Taoist ideals could elaborate on and clarify deep ecology's position on the environment—"leading to a more satisfactory and richer Deep Ecology Theory."<sup>1</sup> Not all deep ecologists draw such strong parallels between deep ecology and Taoism, but many deep ecology supporters credit Eastern thought, including Taoism, as an ideological foundation for the deep ecology movement.

Because both mainstream environmentalism and deep ecological thought share similar holistic and egalitarian premises, it is not surprising that both would also draw parallels with Taoist concepts. Many mainstream environmentalists and deep ecologists question the appropriateness of the traditional Western view of nature and look to the East for insights. However, it is the level of the questioning, not the content of the answer, that is the earmark of deep ecology theory.<sup>2</sup> Instead of merely asking "how" and "what," Arne Naess claims to seek out the "why."

The founding father of deep ecology, Arne Naess, credits Taoism, along with other religions, for deep ecology's philosophical foundations.

Those engaged in the deep ecology movement have so far revealed their philosophical or religious homes to be mainly in Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Baha'i, or in various philosophies. The top level of the derivational pyramid can, in such cases, be made up of normative and descriptive principles which belong to these religions and philosophies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Sylvan and David Bennett, "Taoism and Deep Ecology," *The Ecologist* 18 (1988): 148.

<sup>2</sup> Arne Naess from Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1990), p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> Arne Naess, "The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects," from *Deep Ecology for the Twenty First Century*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1995), p. 79.

Deep ecologists emphasize Taoist values relevant to their environmental theory; three of these key points are discussed in the three sections of this chapter:

1. The unprivileged role of humanity in the natural world
2. The simple life, with a minimum of technology and materialism
3. The belief that nature is self-regulating and that forceful human intervention is both unneeded and unwelcome.

### *Section 1*

#### *The Relation of Humanity and Nature*

##### *Humanity's Role in Taoist Thought*

Taoist writings present an integrated attitude towards nature as a fundamental precept governing human activity. Humanity is not seen as the crowning glory of a biological hierarchy; it is merely one of the myriad 10,000 creatures. Russell Goodman illustrates this point, citing Chuang Tzu's view on his impending death.

The Taoist's idealized nature, and they saw human beings as not especially important parts of nature, an attitude implicit in the deathbed scene in which Chuang Tzu happily anticipates his transformation into a rat's liver or a bug's arm. We have no souls or reason to distinguish us from other creatures, if we are distinguishable, it is by our presumption, our feelings of self importance. At the core of Taoism is an attempt to restrain such feelings.<sup>4</sup>

Western philosophy may set humanity apart from nature conceptually, but Taoists see humans as simply one of the many manifestations of *tao*. The distinctions within the plurality of *tao* are individually manifested; yet, they are equally merged within its unity. In the *Tao te Ching*, this insight is the grounding of Taoist knowledge which, in turn, leads to enlightenment.

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<sup>4</sup> Goodman, "Taoism," p. 80.

The myriad of creatures all rise together  
And I watch their return.  
The teaming creatures  
All return to their separate roots.  
Returning to one's roots is known as stillness.  
This is what is meant by returning to one's destiny.  
Returning to one's destiny is known as the constant.  
Knowledge of the constant is known as discernment  
Woe to him who innovates  
While ignorant of the constant,  
But should one act from knowledge of the constant  
One's actions will lead to impartiality,  
Impartiality to kingliness.  
Kingliness to heaven,  
Heaven to the way,  
The way to perpetuity,  
And to the end of one's days one will meet with no danger.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter describes the entire Taoist epistemology. It illustrates (1) what kind of knowledge is the most important to attain; (2) what that knowledge imparts; (3) how that knowledge affects beliefs and actions; (4) how these beliefs and actions can lead to enlightenment in Tao; and (5) how that enlightenment can guide and protect the individual (as well as society).

The knowledge that all beings are equally merged in *tao* is the grounding for Taoist thought; all wisdom emanates from the knowledge of the uncarved block, reality before human distinctions. "The epistemology of Taoism quite simply is founded on the assumption, drawn from its metaphysics, that the knower belongs to that which is to be known, the reality of Tao . . . it is an acceptance of the spiritual oneness of all that exists."<sup>6</sup> Chuang Tzu calls this the Grand Infusion, *Ta T'ung*, that transcends intellect; it is a "state of being that we naturally participate in."<sup>7</sup> According to Po-Keung Ip, this conviction fosters a unilateral reverence for all species. "Everything is to be treated on an

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<sup>5</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, p. 72.

<sup>6</sup> Wawrytko, *Undercurrent*, p. 82

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

equal footing. To use a more apt term, everything is seen as ‘ontologically equal. . . . Homocentrism is simply an alien thing in the Taoist axiological ordering of beings.’<sup>8</sup>

The *Tao te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu* teach humility and meekness; they warn humans never to act through ambition or superiority. Both texts encourage an egalitarian harmony between humanity and nature, as opposed to the Western role of steward or perfecter. They both contain strong warnings against displaying superiority in any form.

To be overbearing when one has wealth and position is to bring calamity upon oneself.

Therefore, the sage avoids excess, extravagance, and arrogance.

It is the way of heaven to show no favoritism.<sup>9</sup>

Although these texts contain advice for attaining the proper attitude, they lack specific guidelines or rules for everyday conduct. The directives may be ambiguous in character and detail, yet the message is unmistakable: a spiritual relatedness exists among all entities. It is a normative philosophy in which rules and regulations are self-supplied, not externally imposed. “Undominated things are naturally self-governing.”<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Lao Tzu cautions those who ignore his advice: “That which goes against the way will come to an early end.”<sup>11</sup>

From this brief description of the Taoist view of humanity’s place in nature, it is evident that deep ecologists can draw many parallels with their own doctrines. Some have cited Taoist texts directly, while others have incorporated the spirit of the philosophy without specifically citing Taoist sources.

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<sup>8</sup> Po-Keung Ip, “Taoism,” p. 339.

<sup>9</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, pp. 65, 87, 141.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Sylvan and David Bennett, “Taoism and Deep Ecology,” *The Ecologist* 18 (1988): 149.

<sup>11</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, p. 116.

## *Humanity's Role in Deep Ecology Literature*

Deep ecology seeks to close the chasm between humans and nature by returning humanity to a balanced coexistence with the natural world. Authors such as Sylvan, Bennett, and Naess propose that Taoist concepts such as *tao* and *ch'i* can help bridge the gap with an attitude of spiritual relatedness.

Deep ecology asserts that mainstream environmentalists may claim a holistic view of nature, yet they continue to endorse an attitude of human moral superiority. Deep ecologists charge mainstream environmentalism with extending human values to nature, thus perpetuating an anthropocentric hierarchy. Citing Leopold's land ethic as an example of this ethical extension, Sylvan and Bennett argue that Deep Green ethics are morally, and modally, different. They state, "Further elaboration of these points returns us to an overarching theme already broached: the inadequacy, given deeper green requirements, of all established ethics. . . . All established ethics answer back, in one way or another, to humans or persons."<sup>12</sup> Sylvan and Bennett propose that humans should eliminate hierarchical implications altogether. They maintain that a true "greening of ethics involves a transvaluation of values" that recognizes the inherent values in nature without human affirmation.<sup>13</sup> It is their belief that human interests are equally relevant to other ecological concerns, not superior to them. This is a moral adjustment that they describe as an "ethical Copernican revolution" that metaphorically removes humans from the center of the moral universe.<sup>14</sup> They admit that this realignment of values may prove disquieting. "It is disquieting because it is seen as a down-grading of humans or at least their ethically privileged position," and further, "[because] they can no longer justify by a

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<sup>12</sup> Sylvan and Bennett *Greening of Ethics*, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

spurious sense of moral superiority their environmentally destructive conveniences and whims.”<sup>15</sup>

Arne Naess and George Sessions offer eight points that characterize their deep ecology position. The number one point expresses the ideal moral relationship between humanity and nature.

The well being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value and inherent worth). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.<sup>16</sup>

Naess claims that *tao* embodies the egalitarian unity that is an essential principle of deep ecology, as well as Ecosophy T, his personal philosophy of “Self-realization.”

Naess employs the concept of *tao* as an example of metaphysical interconnectedness that is similar to wide identification with nature in his own theory. In Self-realization, the individual identifies with nature on a wider and wider scale, until all of nature is encompassed in this identification. Essentially all of nature becomes one with the widened Self, a concept that is comparable to the unity of *tao*.

This seeming duality between individuals and the totality is encompassed by what I call the Self, and what the Chinese call the Tao. Most people in deep ecology have had the feeling that they are connected with something greater than their ego, greater than their name, their family, their special attributes as an individual—a feeling that is often called oceanic because many of us have had this feeling on the ocean. Without that identification, one is not so easily drawn to become involved in deep ecology.<sup>17</sup>

Naess contends that this link with nature provides a normative guideline for identification with and compassion for all other things. This contention does not imply that Naess would have society reject Christianity in favor of Taoism; he denies that there

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<sup>15</sup> Sylvan and Bennett, *Greening of Ethics*, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> Naess, “The Deep Ecological Movement,” p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> Naess, “Simple in Means, Rich in Ends,” in Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, p. 30.

is one singular path to deep ecology. “Deep ecology as a conviction, with its subsequently derived practical recommendations, can follow from a number of more comprehensive worldviews, from differing ecosophies.”<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, many deep ecology supporters rely on Naess’s personal ecosophy (which has unmistakable Eastern undertones) as a template for their own beliefs. Naess credits Gandhi (as well as Spinoza) as a significant influence, but his views could easily have come directly from Taoism. Four of the shared aspects of these philosophies are:

1. The psychological connection to and identification with all species
2. The rejection of human superiority
3. The normative character of deep ecology values
4. The spiritual (even religious) aspect of deep ecology theory.

While the mainstream holistic model *conceptually* integrates humans with nature, Ecosophy T integrates humans with *nature spiritually* as well. Naess does not insist that others abide by his personal ecosophy, but he advocates a psychological or spiritual outlook as a fundamental element for any deep ecology supporter. According to Naess, a spiritual connection to the environment is essential; remaining at the conceptual level would severely limit one’s understanding. Naess’s personal pathway to is “Self-Realization,” a broadening and deepening of the self. “The first perception of deep ecology is that humans can no longer be thought of as belonging to a species which makes them exclusively ends-in-themselves. Instead, all beings must be regarded as ends-in-themselves, possessed of unique drives and purposefulness.”<sup>19</sup> Self-realization expands the individual egocentric *self* to the globally aware *Self*.

This Self expands from each of us to include all. . . .The “Self” is not one that swallows all of these lifeforms acquisitively and possessively, but

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<sup>18</sup> Naess, “The Deep Ecological Movement,” in Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, p. 79.

<sup>19</sup> P. Smith, *Ethics*, p. 6.

rather it is one that identifies with them, recognizing that these creatures and features are part of oneself and that one is part of a whole of life, a local living system. For Naess, all these parts have “equal status,” whether human or non-human.<sup>20</sup>

Naess’s Self-realization does not come with a detailed set of guidelines; it is also a normative philosophy meant to expand individual interests from narrow egoism to all-embracing ecocentrism. Because of a deepened perception of self and nature, the individual spontaneously follows the exacting norms of a deepened environmental ethic. Naess stresses that “the significant tenets of the Deep Ecology Movement are clearly and forcefully normative.”<sup>21</sup>

The analogy and metaphor of Taoist texts reveal a comparable normative moral philosophy. The *Tao te Ching* states: “Yet the way is revered and virtue honored not because this is decreed by any authority but because it is natural for them to be treated so.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, in both Taoism and deep ecology, once the individual accepts their interconnectedness to all things, they intuitively act with compassion towards nature.

In Naess’s opinion, any effective ecophilosophy must include a spiritual, even religious, outlook. George Sessions explains that the foundation of Naess’s environmental philosophy includes “religious and philosophical commitments and belief systems.”<sup>23</sup> According to Naess, it is the blending of spiritual and normative elements that leads to concrete actions toward deep ecology’s objectives. Naess rejects the description of deep ecology as a religion; he prefers to characterize it as a general philosophy, partially inspired by the science of ecology.<sup>24</sup> Yet both philosophy and

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<sup>20</sup> P. Smith, *Ethics*, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Arne Naess, “Self-Realization: an Ecological Approach to Being in the World,” from Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, p. 236

<sup>22</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, p. 112.

<sup>23</sup> George Sessions, “Deep Ecology as Worldview,” in Tucker and Grim, *Worldviews and Ecology*, p. 210.

<sup>24</sup> Naess, “Deep Ecological Movement,” in Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, p. 79.



religion play a central role in deep ecology. Naess states that “supporters of the deep ecology movement act from deep premises. They are motivated, in part, from a philosophical or religious position.”<sup>25</sup> For Naess, spiritual and philosophical convictions, in cooperation with rational and scientific findings, are an important facet of deep ecology theory. According to Naess, “If an environmentally oriented policy decision is not linked to intrinsic values or ultimates, then its rationality has yet to be determined. The deep ecology movement connects rationality with a set of philosophical or religious foundations.”<sup>26</sup> For Naess, these spiritual and religious foundations are grounded in philosophies such as Taoism:

Personally, I favor the kind of premises represented in Chinese, Indian, Islamic, Hebrew, as well as in Western philosophy, namely those which have the so-called ultimate unity of all life as a slogan. They do not hide the fact that big fish eat small ones, but stress the profound interdependence, the functional unity, of such a biospheric magnitude that non-violence, mutual respect, and feelings of identification are always potentially there. . . . Another idea, right at the basis of a system from which environmental norms are derivable, is that of self-realization. The mature human individual with a widened self, acknowledges a right to self realization that is universal, and seeks a social order, or rather a biospherical order, which maximizes the potential for self-realization for all kinds of beings.<sup>27</sup>

George Sessions describes the West’s traditional stance towards nature as an “anthropocentric detour.”<sup>28</sup> Sessions claims that most primal societies were nature oriented, but as many became urbanized, they became increasingly anthropocentric.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, he holds that Taoist texts and attitudes help preserve a spiritual

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>27</sup> Naess, “The Place of Joy in a World of Fact,” in Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, p. 257.

<sup>28</sup> Sessions, “Anthropocentric Detour,” in Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, p. 156.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

connection with nature. Sessions goes so far as to cite Taoism as one of the foundations of modern ecological consciousness and the deep ecology movement.<sup>30</sup>

Sessions supports G. Tyler Miller's opinion that the traditional Western paradigm must be reevaluated and/or replaced. Instead of trying to steer "spaceship earth," humans should give up "our fantasies of omnipotence" and listen to the fundamental rhythms of nature. "We must learn anew that it is we who belong to the earth not the earth to us."<sup>31</sup>

Both Sessions and Tyler maintain that at least a partial solution for the environmental problem lies in a return to the values of nature-oriented religions such as Taoism. Taoism disallows any human self-importance or arrogance. In the *Tao te Ching*, Lao Tzu warns: "He who boasts will not endure."<sup>32</sup> Sessions credits *Taoism* as an influence on Naess's philosophy of self-realization.

Self Realization, is that of the universe (Nature, the Tao) and all the individuals (human and non-human) of which it is comprised realizing itself . . . when they progress from identification of a narrow ego . . . to a more all encompassing identification with their "Self" with non-human individuals, species, ecosystems, and with the ecosphere itself.<sup>33</sup>

Warwick Fox emphasizes the normative aspect of Naess's philosophy as well. Fox states that moral knowledge comes from the observation of nature from an integrated perspective similar to the Taoist attitude. His view is that deep ecological thought is not based on universal laws and rulings, but in a sense of psychological involvement with all of nature. He quotes Naess as saying, "I am not interested much in morals or ethics. I am interested in how we experience the world. . . . Ethics follow from how we experience

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<sup>30</sup> Sessions, "Deep Ecology as a Worldview," in Tucker and Grim, *Worldviews and Ecology*, p. 210.

<sup>31</sup> Miller quoted from Sessions, "Deep Ecology as Worldview," in Tucker and Grim, *Worldviews and Ecology*, p. 221

<sup>32</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, p. 81.

<sup>33</sup> Sessions, "Deep Ecology as a Worldview," in Tucker and Grim, *Worldviews and Ecology*, p.211.

the world. If you experience the world so and so then you don't kill. If you articulate your experience then it can be a philosophy or religion.”<sup>34</sup>

Deep Green Ecologists Richard Sylvan (formerly Routley) and David Bennett make a more straightforward comparison of deep ecology and Taoism. They assert that the wisdom of Taoism can elaborate and enrich deep ecology.<sup>35</sup> Regarding humanity's role, they believe that Taoism rejects the traditional Western model of the relationship between humans and the natural world—namely that they have dominion over the earth and its other inhabitants.<sup>36</sup> Sylvan and Bennett claim that Taoism does not include the concept of a higher power or higher purpose, therefore there is no need for stewards or protectors. Nor does Taoism include any notion of “improving nature.”

The idea of perfecting nature also involves active interference, for Taoists, however, nature is more or less in order as it is, and requires no perfecting. Thus, stewardship and perfectionism are discarded along with domination and dominion.<sup>37</sup>

Sylvan and Bennett offer examples of what they call “human chauvinism” from early Taoist literature. Interpreting *humane* as *homocentric*, they quote the *Tao te Ching*: “‘Heaven and earth are not humane, they regard all things as straw dogs [i.e. rather worthless strictly ritual objects]. The sage is not humane [or human chauvinist]. He regards all people as straw dogs.’”<sup>38</sup> They also cite Chuang Tzu's comment on the same passage, “When [Lao Tzu] says that ‘Heaven and earth are not humane’, he means in a narrow sense that they are impartial, but in a broader sense that nature is no longer governed according to human standards. In one stroke he removes heaven and man as

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<sup>34</sup> Naess from Fox, *Transpersonal Ecology*, p. 219.

<sup>35</sup> Sylvan and Bennett, “Taoism and Deep Ecology,” p. 148.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Lao Tzu, from Sylvan and Bennett, “Taoism and Deep Ecology,” p. 155.

the standards of things and replaces them with Nature.”<sup>39</sup> According to Sylvan and Bennett, the *Chuang Tzu* also encourages a doctrine of impartiality, “Embrace all things without inclining to this way or that;” and “the sage does not bestow special favours upon humans; he aims to be one with Nature.”<sup>40</sup> They maintain that there is a direct correlation between these Taoist passages and deep ecology theory.

What is offered in Taoism is (again like deeper ecological theory) a doctrine of identification. Wide identification and wide solidarity does promote impartiality and counter chauvinism. Egoism, for instance, involves discounting all but oneself; humanism all but humans, and requires a species solidarity with human beings. But wider identification puts a stop to such discounting and to such class-restricted solidarity. For wider identification reveals that interests, desires, values and so forth, are not individual or class restricted.<sup>41</sup>

In summary, the deep ecology position on the human/nature relation emphasizes unity, intuitive understanding, and a psychological kinship; these same characteristics are also significant features of Taoism.

## *Section 2*

### *The Endorsement of the Simple Life*

#### *The Simple Life in Taoist Thought*

Callicott states that Taoism has been described as “anti-urban, anti-humanistic, and anti-bureaucratic. . . . In the argot of contemporary environmentalism, they were ‘bioregionalists.’”<sup>42</sup> The *Tao te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu* contain numerous passages affirming this attitude, as well as what Sylvan and Bennett describe as “a high level of

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<sup>39</sup> Sylvan and Bennett, “Taoism and Deep Ecology,” p. 155.

<sup>40</sup> Chuang Tzu, from Sylvan and Bennett, “Taoism and Deep Ecology,” p. 155.

<sup>41</sup> Sylvan and Bennett, “Taoism and Deep Ecology,” p. 155.

<sup>42</sup> Callicott, *Insights*, p. 67.

ecological consciousness.”<sup>43</sup> Lao Tzu depicts the ruler possessing perfect *Tao*, the sage, and how he conducts government.

He is to cease from meddling in the lives of his people, give up warfare and luxurious living, and guide his people back to a state of innocence, simplicity, and harmony with the Tao, a state that existed in the most ancient times before civilization appeared to arouse the material desires of the people and spur them to strife and warfare, and before morality was invented to befuddle their minds and beguile them with vain distinctions.<sup>44</sup>

Whereas the *Tao te Ching* is regarded as a guide for the individual and the state, the *Chuang Tzu* focuses on the spiritual freedom of the individual with little concern for society as a whole. The *Chuang Tzu* promotes a more direct connection with nature such as the solitary fisherman or farmer, even the life of a recluse. Although his version of Taoism is considered a “hermit in the wilderness” philosophy, it also gained favor in the general population after his death.

Both Taoist texts present strong feelings about materialistic lifestyles. Chuang Tzu recommends: “To leave no examples of extravagance to future generations, to show no wastefulness in the use of things, to indulge in no excess of measures and institutions.”<sup>45</sup> He offers additional guidelines: “Not to be encumbered with popular fashions . . . to seek no more than is sufficient for nourishing oneself and others, thus setting one’s heart at peace.”<sup>46</sup>

The *Tao te Ching* encourages these same ideas, although more cryptically.

Exhibit the unadorned and embrace the uncarved block,  
Have little thought of self and as few desires as possible.

Therefore the sage avoids excess, extravagance, and arrogance.

He who knows contentment is rich.

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<sup>43</sup> Sylvan and Bennett from Callicott, *Insights*, p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> De Bary, *Sources*, p. 50.

<sup>45</sup> Chuang Tzu, *Chuang Tzu*, in De Bary, *Sources*, p. 79.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

The nameless uncarved block  
Is freedom from desire,  
And if I cease to desire and remain still,  
The empire will be at peace of its own accord.

There is no crime greater than having too many desires;  
There is no misfortune greater than being covetous.  
Hence, in being content, one will always have enough.<sup>47</sup>

Lau interprets the Taoist view as that humans are enticed by their natural materialistic tendencies, “ever wanting greater gratification” thus, Taoist writings intend to counter these desires. “Only when a man realizes that he has enough can he learn not to aim at winning greater wealth and more exalted rank, the ceaseless pursuit of which will only end in disaster.”<sup>48</sup> These imperatives promote not only a more spiritually contented lifestyle, but an environmentally friendly one as well.

According to Lao Tzu, the ideal state is small in size and population, simple in means and knowledge, non-aggressive, predominantly self-sufficient, and self-regulating. The people shun technology by reverting to ancient ways; doing so reduces worldly desires and brings about spiritual contentment.

Reduce the size and population of the state. . . . Even when they have ships and carts, they will have no use for them; and even when they have armour and weapons, they will have no occasion to make a show of them. Bring it about that the people will return to use of the knotted rope,  
Will find relish in their food  
And beauty in their clothes,  
Will be content in their abode  
And happy in the way they live.  
Though adjoining states are within sight of one another, and the sound of barking dogs and cocks crowing in one state can be heard in another, yet the people of one state will grow old and die without having had any dealings with those of another.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, pp. 75, 87, 92, 96, 107.

<sup>48</sup> D.C. Lau, Introduction, *Tao te Ching*, p. 28.

<sup>49</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, p. 142.

Taoist texts condemn intellectualism as a form of excess desire. Chuang Tzu states, “There is a limit to our life, but there is no limit to knowledge. To pursue what is unlimited with what is limited is a perilous thing.”<sup>50</sup> The *Chuang Tzu* argues that intellectual theory and discussion are superfluous to everyday existence. He refers to a contemporary, Hui Shih, as an exemplar of its pointlessness. “Hui Shih was a man of many ideas. His writings would fill five carriages. . . . Weak in cultivation of virtue, strong in the handling of things, his way was a narrow one indeed. From the point of view of the Tao of the Universe, Hui Shih’s ingenuity was about as effective as a humming mosquito or a buzzing fly. . . . How sad!”<sup>51</sup> Chuang Tzu makes a distinction between what he calls *small* knowledge (analytical or rational knowledge) and *great* knowledge (intuitive and experiential knowledge) that is “comprehensive, extensive and synthetic.”<sup>52</sup> Great knowledge incorporates facts with the experience gained from living in the world *with Tao*.

Lao Tzu also notes the disparity between great and small knowledge: “Much speech leads inevitably to silence, Better to hold fast to the void.”<sup>53</sup> This remark is a direct criticism of Confucianists who debated every point to a mute conclusion. He asks, “When your discernment penetrates from the four quarters, are you capable of not knowing anything?”<sup>54</sup> In other words, are you capable of giving up your prior assumptions in order to attain true knowledge? When the *Tao te Ching* says to “Exterminate learning, and there will no longer be worries”<sup>55</sup> it refers to those who use

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<sup>50</sup> De Bary, *Sources*, p. 73.

<sup>51</sup> Chuang Tzu, *Chuang Tzu*, in *Sources*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>52</sup> Sylvan and Bennett, “Taoism and Ecology,” p. 155.

<sup>53</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, p. 61.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

clever debating as a substitute for wisdom. For Lao Tzu, true knowledge is not the analytical study of facts or logical argumentation, but the intuitive synthesis of facts based on experience and *Tao*.

Truthful words are not beautiful; beautiful words are not truthful. Good words are not persuasive; persuasive words are not good. He who knows has no wide learning; he who has wide learning does not know.<sup>56</sup>

### *The Simple Life in Deep Ecology Literature*

Arne Naess's Deep Ecology platform and accompanying list of attitudes emphasize many elements of "the simple life." These goals include the following:

1. Use of simple means to reach an end or goal—avoid unnecessary or complicated means
2. Appreciation of accessible and plentiful goods
3. Absence of "novophilia"—the love of what is merely new—cherish old and well-worn things
4. Depth and richness of experience instead of intensity
5. Cultivating life in a community rather than a larger society
6. Participation in primary production of goods
7. Satisfaction of vital needs rather than desires.
8. Non-violence
9. Reduction in population
10. Anti-consumerism and minimization of possessions.<sup>57</sup>

There is a striking similarity between Naess's list and the idealized lifestyle promoted by Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. Whereas Lao Tzu says to "reduce the size and population of the state"<sup>58</sup> Naess states, "Deeper positions opt for a population sufficient to sustain cultural, economic and other activities, and diversity. . . . All that is sought is a large enough population to provide sufficient variety in significant respects, but not excess."<sup>59</sup>

Contrary to some interpretations, Naess does not advocate the "culling" or mass

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>57</sup> Naess, "Deep Ecology and Lifestyle," pp. 259-60.

<sup>58</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, p. 142.

<sup>59</sup> Naess from Sylvan and Bennett, *Greening of Ethics*, p. 118.



extermination of humans, but a gradual population decline through attrition and negative population growth. The hypothesis, in both Taoism and deep ecology, is that a smaller population would “bring about a change in relationships with the environment,” thereby reducing the destruction of nature. As Sylvan and Bennett put it, “Humans have both overrun and overfilled their own niche and the niches of most, if not all, other species.”<sup>60</sup> Naess stresses anti-consumerism; a community-based lifestyle of primary production (small-scale agriculture, fishing, and forestry); living in nature “light and traceless”; appreciation of all life forms as an “ends” not a “means,” and at least partial vegetarianism. Although they may hold differing belief systems, deep ecology supporters agree with the simpler and less destructive lifestyle endorsed by deep ecology theory.

As with the metaphor and analogy of the Taoist texts, Naess describes his guidelines as vague generalizations not rigid laws. However, he defends their effectiveness: “They are clearly and forcefully normative; . . . a set of sentences with a variety of functions, descriptive and prescriptive.”<sup>61</sup> It is his belief that ecosophy must be “necessarily only moderately precise” because it is its global character, not preciseness in detail, that distinguishes it as an ecosophy.

Another parallel in the two philosophies is the aspect of living “in place.” This principle involves living in one area exclusively in order to develop all of its potentials. This lifestyle helps the population to gain knowledge of the natural tendencies of the area to help “support an integrated and sustainable environmental and economic attitude.” This type of “bioregionalism” is implied in the *Tao te Ching* and endorsed in

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<sup>60</sup> Sylvan and Bennett, *Greening of Ethics*, p. 117.

<sup>61</sup> Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep,” from Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, pp. 154-55.

deep ecology literature. “The intention of bioregionalism is to make the people living in a bioregion self-regulating.”<sup>62</sup> It is deep ecology’s intention that creating a closer connection with the land would help society to realize nature’s inherent worth over any economic considerations.

One of the “Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove”(a group of Neo-Taoist scholars who often met in bamboo groves), Hsi K’ang, declared that people should “cultivate the field to raise food and weave silk for clothing. When these are sufficient, leave the wealth of the world alone.”<sup>63</sup> His imperative expresses the connection between closer ties to nature and spiritual contentment. He later states:

What is difficult to acquire in the world is neither wealth nor glory, but a sense of contentment. If one is contented, though he has only a small plot to cultivate, a coarse garment to wear, and beans to eat, in no case is he dissatisfied. If one is discontented, though the whole world supports him and all things serve him, he is still not gratified. Thus it is that the contented needs nothing from the outside whereas the discontented needs everything from the outside.<sup>64</sup>

Both deep ecology and Taoism profess that contentment comes from spiritual values, not the desire for “things.” The deep ecology maxim of “simple in means; rich in ends,” may not require everyone to “cultivate small plots” or weave all their own coarse clothing, but it does endorse a voluntary simplicity. Sylvan and Bennett claim that in deep ecology, “a way of life is depicted, based on love, respect, and compassion for all things, attuned to what is essential, shedding what is unnecessary, where simplicity and frugality are sought, and excess avoided.”<sup>65</sup> Naess stresses that society should look to

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<sup>62</sup> Sylvan and Bennett, *Greening of Ethics*, p. 120.

<sup>63</sup> Hsi K’ang, from de Bary, *Sources*, p. 248.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>65</sup> Sylvan and Bennett, “Taoism and Ecology,” p. 152.

meet only vital needs at nature's expense, while minimizing personal property, decreasing "novophilia," and favoring "the old, much worn things."

Another shared aspect of Taoism and deep ecology is the directive to reduce or eliminate technology that could adversely affect the environment. Naess argues that the scientific and economic world may offer facts, but they are valueless and colorless. He states, "The so-called physical reality, in terms of modern science, is perhaps only a piece of abstract mathematical reality—a reality we emphatically do not live in."<sup>66</sup> Naess believes that technological experts fragment the experience of living in the world; for him, knowledge of reality, although fact-based, is realized intuitively through experience. He supports "soft" sciences that emphasize the total experience of nature over its production potential.

In Taoism, technology is seen as an example of *small* or pointless knowledge that leads to a progression of greater and greater desires. Sylvan and Bennett clarify this point: "Lao Tzu recognized clearly that even low impact technology may destroy human practices and conventions constructive to a community. Nor was the connection of technology with population neglected. Given a small country and few inhabitants, if provided with a labour-saving device he would not use it."<sup>67</sup>

Point 3 of the deep ecology platform criticizes humanity for interfering with the non-human world by means of its advanced technology. Naess claims there has been an increase in the "nature and extent" of society's modifications beyond environmentally tolerable parameters.<sup>68</sup>

Technology is more helpless than ever before because the technology being produced doesn't fulfill basic human needs, such as meaningful

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<sup>66</sup> Naess, "The Place of Joy," in Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, p. 258.

<sup>67</sup> Sylvan and Bennett, "Taoism and Ecology," p. 156.

<sup>68</sup> Naess, "The Deep Ecological Movement," in Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, p. 69.

work in a meaningful environment. Technical progress is sham progress because the term technical progress is cultural, not a technical term. Our culture is the only one in history that has adjusted itself to the technology rather than vice versa. In traditional Chinese culture, the bureaucracy opposed the use of inventions that were not in harmony with the general cultural aims of the nation. . . . We interfere a million times more deeply in nature than we did one hundred years ago, and our ignorance is increasing in proportion to the information that is required.”<sup>69</sup>

It is clear to Naess and most other deep ecologists that society cannot return to the primitive lifestyle described by Lao Tzu; nevertheless, they believe that society can emulate Taoist values. Naess clarifies his earlier maxim: “I’m not for the simple life, except in the sense of a life simple in means, but rich in goals and values.”<sup>70</sup> While Chuang Tzu instructed his followers, “to leave no evidence of extravagances,” or not indulge in “excesses in measures or institutions,” Naess calls for a radical shift in how humanity views the world.

I think it is a shift from being dominated by means, instruments, and gadgets, all the things we think will give us pleasure or make us happy or perfect. The shift comes about when we seriously ask ourselves, “In what situations do I experience the maximum satisfaction of my whole being?” and find that we need practically nothing of what we are supposed to need for a rich and fulfilling life.<sup>71</sup>

The simple life in deep ecology standards may not include wearing coarse garments or cultivating a small plot of land, as in the *Tao te Ching*, but many of the underlying values are the same. As Naess states, it does involve a commitment to “fundamental values of what is important in life which make it completely clear that we in the rich countries are opposed to further development for the sake of increased domination and an increased standard of living.”<sup>72</sup> According to deep ecology theory,

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<sup>69</sup> Naess, “Simple in Means, Rich in Ends,” in Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

humanity needs to establish a deliberate relationship with its own surroundings and “jettison much of the clutter and gadgetry of modern civilization.”<sup>73</sup>

### *Section 3*

#### *The Maxim of Following Nature*

##### *Following Nature in Taoism*

Following nature is the central principle of Taoist activity. Taoists held that returning to the “uncarved block,” a state of original simplicity allows the individual to comprehend the appropriate balance in all things. According to Watts, “If there is anything basic to Chinese culture, it is an attitude of respectful trust towards nature and human nature . . . it is a matter of realizing that oneself and nature are one and the same process, which is the Tao.”<sup>74</sup> There is an implicit trust that nature will always show the way; the strongest advisories in Taoism advocate following nature’s lead.

Do that which consists of taking no action, and order will prevail.

The empire is a sacred vessel and nothing should be done to it. Whoever does anything to it will ruin it; whoever lays hold of it will lose it.

The way never acts yet nothing is left undone,  
Should lords and princes be able to hold fast to it,  
The myriad of creatures will be transformed of their own accord.

One does less and less until one does nothing at all, and when one does nothing at all there is nothing left undone.<sup>75</sup>

Taoism holds that “nature knows best” and that humans can learn from that knowledge.

When humans attain this level of intuitive knowledge, they can live in the world

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<sup>73</sup> P. Smith, *Ethics*, p. 5.

<sup>74</sup> Watts, *Watercourse Way*, p. 32.

<sup>75</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, pp. 59, 80, 96, 109.

effortlessly without the need of technology. Lao Tzu describes the seamless activity of following nature.

One who excels in travelling leaves no wheel tracks;  
One who excels in reckoning uses no counting rods;  
One who excels in shutting uses no bolts yet what he has shut cannot be opened;  
One who excels in tying uses no cords yet what he ties cannot be undone.<sup>76</sup>

The *Chuang Tzu* says that actions should “be harmonized according to the order of nature and left to her changing processes. This is the way for us to complete our years.”<sup>77</sup> Chuang Tzu also warns against opposing the physical forces of nature.

Therefore it has been said, do not let the artificial obliterate the natural; do not let effort obliterate destiny; . . . Diligently observe these precepts without fail, and thus you will revert to the original innocence.”<sup>78</sup>

### *Following Nature in Deep Ecology Literature*

Naess holds strong views regarding humanity’s technological interference in nature. Although his recent works are more moderate, Naess’s early works focussed on the strict ecological equilibrium of the “balance of nature” paradigm. In the early 1970’s, deep ecology supported the maxim that nature knows best—that humans should let Earth’s processes unfold naturally without any intervention. Naess states that “policies must be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological structures.”<sup>79</sup> He envisioned this change as a shift to a gentler relationship with nature by respecting its cycles and movements.

In countries like the United States, the crisis is rather one of lifestyle, of our traditions of thoughtlessness, of our inability to question deeply what is and what is not worthwhile in life. Within fifty years, either we will need a dictatorship to save what is left of the diversity of life forms, or we will have a shift in values, a shift of our total view such that no

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<sup>76</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, p. 84.

<sup>77</sup> Chuang Tzu, from De Bary, *Sources*, p. 73.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Naess, “The Deep Ecological Movement,” in Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, p. 68.

dictatorship will be needed. It is thoroughly natural to stop dominating, exploiting, and destroying the planet. A “smooth” way, including harmonious living with nature, or a “rough” way, involving a dictatorship and coercion—those are the options.<sup>80</sup>

This strong statement emphasizes Naess’s belief that society must learn to work with the forces of nature, not against them. Although Naess has always encouraged society to “tread lightly on the Earth,” his more recent works make it clear that this maxim does not condemn all technology.

In the 1970’s, the balance of nature paradigm lost favor in ecological circles, and consequently many environmentalists altered their views. Markus and Tarla Rai Peterson describe Naess’s softened stance: “Naess has modified his views somewhat stating that ‘some of the key terms such as harmonious and equilibrium, which were highly valued as key terms of the sixties, are, I think, less adequate today.’”<sup>81</sup> Naess claims that, although society cannot return to a lifestyle devoid of technology, it can place controls on how those technologies are advanced. His current theory more closely resembles the mainstream environmental interpretation of *wu-wei*, appropriate technology.

Richard Sylvan and David Bennett are more stringent in their interpretation of following nature, as well as more specific in their endorsement of Taoist ideals. They take exception to the mainstream explanation of *wu-wei* as appropriate technology. It is their assertion that, in some instances, *wu-wei* should be translated literally, as “no action.” They state, “What is commended is the pacifist action of letting events happen (for example, letting creatures die) as opposed to aggressive, extrovert action (for example, killing) forced action being a means of upsetting natural ways.”<sup>82</sup> In terms of

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<sup>80</sup> Naess, “Simple in Means, Rich in Ends,” in Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, p. 28.

<sup>81</sup> Peterson and Peterson, “Ecology,” p. 139.

<sup>82</sup> Sylvan and Bennett, “Taoism and Deep Ecology,” p. 153.

ecological management, Sylvan and Bennett describe this stance as, “letting things be, in effect a hands off approach.”<sup>83</sup> They criticize deep ecologists, such as Naess, for softening their position concerning acceptable technology.

Taoism exhibits a firmer grasp of some of the problems of technology, even appropriate labour-saving technology, than recent positions of Deep Ecology. . . . Nature is something to be cherished, which should be allowed to take its own course, and which is not to be interfered with or destroyed by humans.<sup>84</sup>

Nevertheless, they acknowledge that following nature can necessitate taking action, but here the action is of yielding, not of assertive force. They use sailing as an example, “Going with the flow can, however, involve a lot of activity as in sailing and trimming to the wind.”<sup>85</sup> Regardless of the action required, Sylvan and Bennett claim that humanity’s goal should be to imitate the spontaneity of nature as “unobtrusively and imperceptibly as possible.” This decree echoes Lao Tzu’s adage to live with *Tao*, by “leaving no wheel tracks.”<sup>86</sup> This axiom portrays the natural order of the universe as delicately balanced and that any discernible human interference would upset this balance and lead to disorder.

#### *Criticisms of Taoist thought in Deep Ecology Literature*

Deep ecologists have encountered as much criticism as mainstream environmentalists for deriving parallels between Taoism and environmental concerns. These critiques apply directly to the points discussed in this chapter:

1. The comparison of *Tao* and Naess’s self-realization
2. The devaluation of the human species
3. The ecological simple life

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 154.



Rolston considers the egalitarian value of *Tao* to be in a different philosophical category from that of the egalitarianism in deep ecology. He claims that in Taoism the concept of *tao* “asserts a kind of organic unity subtending all empirical phenomena.”<sup>87</sup> In Taoism, all phenomena are given equal value in a horizontal account. Rolston maintains that in environmental ethics, a vertical account of weighted value among entities is also necessary. According to Rolston, Taoism errs of the side on generality valuing all things equally because they are a manifestation of *tao*. This preoccupation with the noumenal makes the Taoist interpretation of *tao* irrelevant for a weighted environmental ethic.<sup>88</sup> In Rolston’s opinion, “the [horizontal] connections are rather nondiscriminating . . . whereas, the vertical account connects and evaluates the phenomena in terms of a noumenal Ground. . . . If a metaphysics cannot orient action in some meaningful way, then it is of no help where the West needs help—valuing the environment that humans inhabit. Such a theory cannot be put into practice environmentally.”<sup>89</sup>

Sylvan and Bennett point out that “it must be understood that value is not spread equally throughout the ecosphere.”<sup>90</sup> Since various entities have diverse requirements to reach their natural potentials, they also require different ethical principles and actions.

For it turns out that not only do human needs sometimes have priority over non-human needs, but that we humans have greater obligations to that which is nearer and dearer to us, normally other parochial humans, and therewith correlative duties and also rights. But those are matters of deontic principle, which infringe the egalitarian principle.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, p. 84.

<sup>87</sup> Barnhart, “Ideas,” p. 418.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 420.

<sup>89</sup> Rolston, “Value Nature,” p. 186.

<sup>90</sup> Sylvan and Bennett, *Greening of Ethics*, p. 101.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

Sylvan and Bennett take issue with the comparison of *tao* and the wide identification of the Self in Naess's theory. They argue that Naess's self-realization is actually a recent European idea that is incompatible with Taoist teachings. "For self realization is a maximizing prescription . . . the inflation of an egoistic concept not found in the original Taoism."<sup>92</sup>

Peter van Wyck also comments on Naess's comparison of the expanded Self to the Taoist concept of *tao*. He describes Naess's journey of self-realization as "a kind of metaphysical homecoming."<sup>93</sup> Van Wyck sees Naess's version of self-realization as a process of recollection, not creation, a return to a hypothetical primordial understanding. According to Van Wyck, Taoist tradition is essential to deep ecology's definition of Self; "this self that fades and dissolves into the world flows directly from the ultimate of self-realization."<sup>94</sup> He claims that the draw of self-realization is a theoretical fog that appeals to "the minority tradition," the deep ecology theory that claims that pre-industrial lifestyles should serve as the ultimate ecological model.<sup>95</sup> This minority viewpoint sees primal philosophies, such as Taoism, as an enlightened ideal for modern times. Deep ecology "posits a preexisting humanness that precedes and underlies the artifices of modern life."<sup>96</sup> Van Wyck claims that this preoccupation with the past replaces the view of "nature as other" with "culture as other," in which the modern human becomes an exotic organism.<sup>97</sup>

Deep Ecology falls into the ideological position that sees the primitive as an embryonic version of ourselves. . . . That primitive cultures (on deep

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<sup>92</sup> Sylvan and Bennett, "Taoism and Deep Ecology," p. 154.

<sup>93</sup> Peter C. van Wyck, *Primitives in the Wilderness: Deep Ecology and the Missing Human Subject* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 41.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

ecology's account) are not spoiled by the pernicious aspects of the modern, create a figure of the primitive that is charged symbolically with redemptive possibilities.<sup>98</sup>

Van Wyck claims that this idealized view, which he calls "Disneyland meets Mutual of Omaha," is both erroneous and threatening without answering questions about human responsibility to the environment.<sup>99</sup>

Richard Watson views the simple life as based on a utopian view of human nature that would lead to limitations of human freedom.<sup>100</sup> One of the fears voiced by Watson is enforced birth control. Deep ecology has been accused of misanthropy, stemming from Naess's appeal to reduce the population comparable to Lao Tzu's plea of reducing the size of the state. These claims, though weak, have caused a backlash against deep ecology. Although no one in deep ecology is seriously advocating genocide, the accusations fuel criticisms of their theory.

Ramachandra Guha explains Eastern philosophy's appeal to deep ecology as a "search for an authentic lineage in Western thought."<sup>101</sup> He disputes Cohen's characterization of Muir as the "Taoist of the (American) West,"<sup>102</sup> calling his reading of Taoist tradition as "selective and indiscriminate." Guha claims that the comparison of the two distinctly different theories take advantage of a "similar underlying structure of discourse in which the East merely serves as a vehicle for western projections."<sup>103</sup>

Deep ecologists see themselves as the spiritual, philosophical, and political vanguard of American and world environmentalism . . . and this coupling of (ancient) Eastern and (modern) ecological wisdom seemingly

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<sup>98</sup> Van Wyck, *Primitives*, p. 44.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., pp. 8, 9.

<sup>100</sup> Fox, *Transpersonal Ecology*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>101</sup> Ramachandra Guha, "Radical Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," in Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, p. 554.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 557.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

helps consolidate the claim that deep ecology is a philosophy of universal significance.<sup>104</sup>

Guha also rejects the comparisons between Eastern concepts, such as *Tao*, with deep ecology theories of wide identification with nature such as Naess's self-realization. He states that such views are monolithic, simplistic, and make the East "the privileged orbit of Western thinkers."<sup>105</sup> According to Guha, early Eastern man's spiritual dependence on nature was not based on visionary deep ecology theory, but was a result of pre-scientific observations. Naess's description of a simple life would have been a futuristic dream for those ancient societies, whereas for the modern world, it is a dramatic departure from its traditional lifestyle. He asserts that deep ecology's romanticized images of these societies tell more about the Western commentator and his desires than it does about the East. Guha states that in the East, conservation was, and still is, a matter of survival; in the West, it is largely a "full stomach" phenomenon that is confined to the rich, urban, and sophisticated."<sup>106</sup>

### *Rebuttals*

The criticism of Naess's biospherical egalitarianism has been answered in two ways, first by a clarification of the term and second by the addition of the proviso "in principle." According to Sessions, Naess's egalitarianism "is essentially a rejection of human chauvinistic ethical theory and the criteria used to ascribe rights and value."<sup>107</sup> Sessions clarifies Naess's claim that all things have a right to blossom and bloom as a metaphorical statement, not an ethical ultimatum. Fox confirms Session's interpretation, adding that his use of *right* is not a formal philosophical position but a "statement of non-

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Guha, "Third World," p. 557.

<sup>106</sup> Roderick Nash from Guha, "Third World," p. 559.

<sup>107</sup> Sessions from Fox, *Transpersonal Ecology*, p. 223.

anthropocentrism.”<sup>108</sup> Naess claims that his use of the term, *right*, has no regulatory meaning, but is an expression his own intuition that all forms of life have a right to live that cannot be quantified.<sup>109</sup>

The deep ecology platform uses the term *in principle*, with the call for biospherical egalitarianism. The implication is that weighted valuations of the natural world are a necessity in the pragmatic lifestyle; thus, egalitarianism is demoted to a theoretical ideal. Many deep supporters feel that the proviso weakens the original axiom. Sylvan and Bennett state, “It is an awkward proviso that sits very uncomfortably with what it restricts.”<sup>110</sup>

Lawrence Johnson answers the charges of misanthropy and devaluation of human life. The claim that deep ecologists would shoot a hunter to save a duck or would let a baby die of leukemia instead of supporting medical research on a mouse are what he calls narrow criticisms.<sup>111</sup>

Narrow criticisms contribute no more to the discussion than do narrow ethical theories. Environmentally oriented philosophers do not claim that ecosystems (or other environmental wholes) are the only things that count, any more than animal rightists claim that (nonhuman) animals are the only things that count.<sup>112</sup>

Johnson stresses that society must avoid the trap of being forced to choose between individual values or holistic values. “Not only can we have it both ways, but we *must* have it both ways.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Fox, *Transpersonal Ecology*, p. 223.

<sup>109</sup> Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 166-67.

<sup>110</sup> Sylvan and Bennett, *Greening of Ethics*, p. 101.

<sup>111</sup> Lawrence Johnson, *A Morally Deep World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 177.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

Sylvan and Bennett deny that Taoism is too vague or archaic to be of any relevant ethical value to the West. They hold that Taoist wisdom can both elaborate on and enrich deep ecology. “Indeed, the points at which Taoism diverges from Deep Ecology (our working example, since it is presently the best known deep environmental theory) touch upon some of the weakest and most controversial parts of the Deep Ecology platform.”<sup>114</sup> Sylvan and Bennett hold that idealizing the communal village lifestyle may be an anachronistic notion, but such notions can be seen as conservative as well as radical. “To be sure, there are conservative elements in Taoism . . . for instance the desire to conserve elements of the natural environment that the ‘conservatives’ wish to exploit or destroy.”<sup>115</sup> Nevertheless, they concede that Taoism as a lifestyle is a radical position challenging the dominant social paradigm, but this challenge may serve as a vehicle to question those traditional values.

It discards or upsets many mainstream values, and most mainstream ways of organizing and doing things. It holds up instead examples of very different lifestyles as being more preferable, and offers a path, simple and modest, between insufficiency and excess.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Sylvan and Bennett, “Taoism,” p. 148.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 3

### ECOFEMINISM AND TAOIST THOUGHT

Ecofeminism shares a number of concerns with both mainstream and deep environmentalist theories; however, the differences in ecofeminism are evident in their fundamental premises. Ecofeminists such as Carolyn Merchant, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Val Plumwood, Charlene Spretnak, and Vandana Shiva question the traditional Western stance regarding the human/nature relationship, the unencumbered advancement of technology, and the value of analytical knowledge. Their questioning, however, promotes a definite feminist agenda. Ecofeminist issues center on the culturally entrenched gender bias that they believe has distorted values between humans and nature, as well as between the sexes. The issues discussed in this chapter include the following:

1. Intuitive knowledge versus rational knowledge
2. The role of the feminine spirituality in nature
3. The biological “motherhood” connection between women and nature.

These are also important themes in Taoist literature; both the *Tao te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu* underscore their importance. Because Taoist principles support the major principles of ecofeminism, it is surprising that these parallels have not been given more attention in ecofeminist literature.

In view of the Taoist notion of dynamic interrelation, Rosemary Radford Ruether credits Taoism as possessing possible clues to a more healing culture. She claims that there is much to be learned from the past, but only if it can be reconstructed into new forms. Ruether maintains that there is no ready-made feminist ecological culture to be

rediscovered from ancient societies, but that many ancient philosophies may contain usable bits and pieces as “compost for new growth.”<sup>1</sup>

Vandana Shiva, an Indian physicist and environmental activist, praises the role of feminine spirituality in ancient civilizations, especially the Indian concept of *Prakriti*, but says little on the topic of Taoism. Val Plumwood explores the gender bias of deductive reasoning as opposed to emotion-centered intuitive knowledge, yet does not cite the same sentiments in Taoist literature. In *The Undercurrent of Feminine Philosophy in Eastern and Western Thought*, Sandra Wawrytko examines the feminine role of nature, intuitive knowledge, and feminine spirituality in the *Tao te Ching* from a feminist perspective.<sup>2</sup> Her book relates many ecofeminist concerns directly to Taoist principles.

### *Section 1*

#### *Intuitive Knowledge in Ecofeminism and Taoist Literature*

##### *Intuitive knowledge in Taoist Thought*

As noted in chapter two, Taoist literature distinguishes between the *small* knowledge of rational facts and *great* knowledge. In Taoism, great knowledge—knowledge based on intuition, experience, and reflection—is the highest form of knowledge. The focus of Taoism’s great knowledge is internal or human centered as opposed to the external focus in the small knowledge of rationalism. Taoism rejects discursive thought as “the tool of the analytical thinker who views the principle-pervaded universe as a ‘conscious entity’ to be emulated by identification with its rational

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<sup>1</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminism and Healing Ourselves, healing the Earth,” Lecture series, *Keeping the Spirit Alive*, Calgary, Alberta: St. Stephen’s College, June 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Sandra Wawrytko, *The Undercurrent of Feminine Philosophy in Eastern and Western Thought* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981).



meaning.”<sup>3</sup> According to the *Tao te Ching*, reason is imperfect without the addition of internal intuitive wisdom; logical correctness must be tempered with insight.

Without stirring abroad  
One can know the whole world;  
Without looking out the window  
One can see the way of heaven.  
The further one goes  
The less one knows.  
Therefore the sage knows without having to stir,  
Identifies without having to see.<sup>4</sup>

This passage argues that one does not have to travel the world in search of external facts; evidence of the “way of heaven,” or intuitive knowledge is attained by observing one’s immediate surroundings. *Tao* is everywhere, therefore it can be observed anywhere.

#### *Intuitive knowledge in Ecofeminist Literature*

Val Plumwood claims that both mainstream and deep environmentalism rely on a rationalistic framework that is not only gender biased, but results in a negative attitude towards nature.<sup>5</sup> It is her opinion that all biocentric ethical theories draw on the dualistic opposition of reason and emotion. They characterize “feminine” emotions as “essentially unreliable, untrustworthy, and morally irrelevant, an inferior domain to be dominated by a superior, disinterested (and of course masculine) reason.”<sup>6</sup> She claims these ethical systems associate emotions with the natural world, thus they are assigned a

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<sup>3</sup> Wawrytko, *Undercurrent*, p. 71.

<sup>4</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> Val Plumwood, “Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism,” in *Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Michael Zimmerman, J. Baird Callicott, George Sessions, Karen Warren, John Clark (Upper Saddle River, N J: Prentice Hall, 1998), p. 291.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

lower status. Emotion is seen as the enemy of reason— “corrupting capricious, and self-interested;” it is morally suspect and thus useless as grounding for ethical values.<sup>7</sup>

Karen Warren also asserts that woman’s association with nature is the basis for the oppressive conceptual framework of patriarchy. She argues that in Western dualism disjunctive pairs are seen as oppositional and exclusive, with one member of the pair assigned a higher value. In the pairing of reason and emotion, historically the “masculine” attribute of reason is viewed as superior to “feminine” emotion. Using the rules of logic, she outlines the patriarchal argument:

1. Women are identified with nature: men are identified with the human or rational
2. Whatever is identified with nature is inferior to the human
3. Thus, women are inferior, and men are superior
4. Therefore, men are justified in subordinating women and nature.<sup>8</sup>

Warren charges that the fallacy in this argument rests in the assumption of truth in premises 1 and/or 2; if either or both are false, then of course the conclusions are false as well. “What all ecofeminists agree about, then, is the way in which the logic of domination has functioned historically to sustain and justify the twin dominations of women and nature.”<sup>9</sup> Warren believes that the logic of domination and its corollaries must be abolished in order for any meaningful progress to take place in environmental matters.

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<sup>7</sup> Plumwood, “Gender,” p. 294.

<sup>8</sup> Karen J. Warren, “The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism,” in Zimmerman et al, *Environmental Philosophy*, p. 434.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 438.

Sandra Wawrytko claims that rationalism assumed that reason was the measure of the human potential, therefore, the promise of rationalistic thought was limitless. As science has discovered, however, the chaotic disposition of the natural world has plagued rationalist attempts to order and define it. Taoists take a different approach in viewing nature as this quotation from Carl Jung demonstrates:

Whilst the Western mind carefully sifts, weighs, selects, classifies, and isolates; the Chinese picture of the moment, encompasses everything down to the minutest detail, because all of the ingredients make up the observed moment.<sup>10</sup>

Wawrytko holds that the disorder that troubles logical thought is an integral part of intuitive knowledge. She claims that intuitive knowledge, historically associated with the feminine, encompasses the “indiscriminate acceptance of the data of reality without laying a stress on favored elements.”<sup>11</sup> This form of knowledge incorporates the elements of change and chance into a more cosmic perspective in which even trivial events are understood in the context of the whole. She compares this view with the undulation of *yin/yang* in Taoist philosophy. “It is an explanation eminently in keeping with the feminine principle in that change is viewed as a cyclical process rather than the linear progression of the masculine perspective.”<sup>12</sup>

Chinese philosophy views *yin* and *yang* as ongoing processes, not static entities; all of nature is seen as a collection of dynamic and relational processes. Taoist epistemology minimizes the importance of external facts and logical correctness and replaces them with a spontaneous knowledge—a feminine receptivity that is both internal and intuitive. The “feminine mode” of knowing does not eliminate the need for facts,

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<sup>10</sup> Carl Jung quoted from Foreword to Wilhem’s trans. of *I Ching*, in Wawrytko, *Undercurrent*, p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> Wawrytko, *Undercurrent*, p. 65.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

but regards them as supportive features of intuitive knowledge. They are no longer considered truths in themselves. The *either/or* of rational dualism is supplanted by the intuitive inclusivity of *both/and*. Wawrytko argues, “It is thus that reason prepares the path for intuition.”<sup>13</sup> The *Tao te Ching* advises, “Know the male, but keep to the role of the female.”<sup>14</sup> In terms of wisdom, this adage suggests that it may be prudent to know reason and facts, but it is unwise to consider them as ultimate knowledge.

Plumwood charges that the Western world’s reliance on rational knowledge is a major source of its environmental problems. She states, “The supremacy accorded an oppositionally construed reason is the key to the anthropomorphism in the Western tradition. The Kantian-rationalist framework, then, is hardly the arena in which to search for a solution.”<sup>15</sup> Plumwood describes the rational framework as seriously incomplete without the additional components of caring, concern, and respect based on a relational connection. Because of its narrow perspective, rationality promotes an exclusionary and oppositional view of nature that Plumwood calls “the discontinuity problem.”<sup>16</sup> She claims that the solution lies in the integration of other viewpoints, such as the feminine, in order to achieve a more intimate relationship with nature. According to Plumwood, “Here the three parts of the problem—the conception of the human, the conception of the self, and the conception of nature—connect again.”<sup>17</sup>

Shu-hsien Liu agrees with this assessment, stating that rationalism and technology have severed the primordial bond between humanity and nature. “Modern humanity is threatened by meaninglessness, we are isolated from nature to the extent that we are

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. xxii.

<sup>14</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, p. 83.

<sup>15</sup> Plumwood, “Gender,” p. 294.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 308.

strangers in the universe.”<sup>18</sup> He claims that Chinese thought does not rely on abstractions but views the universe as a holistic fusion of dynamic processes. “We must not forget that abstractions are still only abstractions; they cannot be made a substitute for real life.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, scientific theory and principles may be useful tools for intellectual discourse, but they do not represent the total experience of reality.

Carolyn Merchant describes how science and reason have supplanted the organicism of female-centered societies. She believes that the human/nature relationship should embrace the notion of humans as equal caretakers of nature, not dominators of nature. Environmental ethics should be “non-violent yet confrontational, feminist, ecologically informed, and historically aware.”<sup>20</sup> In her judgment, the earth’s only hope in overcoming technology’s “ecological ruins” is the conjunction of ecology and the women’s movement.<sup>21</sup>

Wawrytko insists that intuitive knowledge focuses on the “being-here- now” aspects of experience as opposed to the rational approach, which focuses on some projected future goal. This feminine approach, as she describes it, closely parallels Taoist thought. The historically female-linked traits of surrender, trust, nurture, imagination, and intuition are highly revered in Taoism as the qualities of receptivity, acceptance, creativity, and wisdom.

Thus, both ecofeminism and Taoist literature challenge the supremacy of reason, rationality, and logical correctness. Warren suggests that ecofeminism critiques Western epistemology in order to develop ethical views that do not “maintain and perpetuate

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<sup>18</sup> Liu, “Reconstructing,” p. 459.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 465.

<sup>20</sup> Merchant from P. Smith, *Ethics*, p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Merchant from P. Smith, *Ethics*, p. 20.

harmful value dualisms and hierarchies, particularly human-nature ones.”<sup>22</sup> Taoist philosophy also denies Western dualism by emphasizing the unity among all entities. The *Tao te Ching* declares that the blending of the *yin* and the *yang* (the male and the female) is the origin of the creative forces of the universe. “The way begets one, one begets two, two begets three, three begets the myriad creatures. The myriad creatures carry on their backs the yin and embrace in their arms the yang and are the blending of the generative forces of the two.”<sup>23</sup>

## Section 2

### *Feminine Spirituality in Taoism and Ecofeminism*

#### *The Role of the Feminine in Taoism*

The *Tao te Ching* exalts the *yin* and its associated feminine characteristics; the female is favored over the male throughout the text. The feminine represents the roles of nourisher, unifier, possessor of strength, and ultimately, the source of all things, the Mysterious Female.

The spirit of the valley never dies,  
This is called the mysterious female,  
The gateway of the mysterious female  
Is called the root of heaven and earth.  
Dimly visible, it seems as if it were there  
Yet use will never drain it.<sup>24</sup>

Taoism describes the mysterious female as the source of all things as well as a limitless well of strength and power. Thus, the power of the female is not through aggression or

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<sup>22</sup> Warren, Introduction to Ecofeminism section in Zimmerman et al, *Environmental Philosophy*, p. 269.

<sup>23</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, p. 103.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

violence, but by means of virtues such as patience, persistence, tranquility, humility, and receptivity. In the *Tao te Ching*, receptivity and humility are understood as “weakness” and “lowness”; however, they are not interpreted in the traditional Western sense as negative traits. Taoist texts revere weakness and lowliness as the highly desirable traits of adaptability and perseverance. These traits are often linked with the element of water as the “emblem of the unassertive”; the resting-place of water or “low ground” is seen as an advantageous position. Waley’s translation of the *Tao te Ching* uses the metaphor of water to illustrate the inherent strength of yielding, a trait associated with the feminine.

The highest good is like that of water. The goodness of water is that it benefits the ten thousand creatures; yet itself does not scramble, but it is content with the places that all men disdain. It is this that makes water so near to the Way.<sup>25</sup>

The *yin* attribute of perseverance, also historically linked to the feminine, possesses the greatest strength; it can overcome the hard and rigid through persistence and endurance. Waley’s translation exemplifies this power with the description of a stream wearing away the rocks in its path. It is an unmistakable metaphor for this penetrating, yet unassuming, force.

Nothing under Heaven is softer or more yielding than water, but when it attacks things hard and resistant there is not one of them that can prevail. For they can find no way of altering it. That the yielding conquers the resistant and the soft conquers the hard is a fact known by all men, yet utilized by none.<sup>26</sup>

D. C. Lau’s translation also emphasizes the predominant role of the female in the *Tao te Ching*: “The female always gets the better of the male by stillness. Being still she takes the lower position.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, trans. Arthur Waley, *The Way and its Power*, p. 151.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>27</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, trans. D. C. Lau, p. 122.

The female in the *Tao te Ching* is also the nurturer, the source, and the goal of *Tao*. In this context, the female signifies the “uncarved block,” the origin of all creation, while also being vitally apparent in each of its manifestations.

The feminine in the *Tao te Ching* also represents the unity that binds together all things. In chapter ten Lao Tzu asks, “Are you capable of keeping to the role of the female?”<sup>28</sup> The realization of the feminine is the highest aspiration of Taoism, from gaining personal tranquility to ruling a nation; it becomes the main objective of life.

In this manner, Taoism exalts the feminine as the unity, the nurturer, and the source of power. The feminine is simultaneously the origin and the goal—it is “the mother of all things.”

#### *The Feminine Principle in Ecofeminism*

There are three major hypotheses in ecofeminism regarding the historical association of women and nature:

1. Elevation of the association of women and nature to include the goddess cultures
2. Acknowledgement of an earth-based spiritual affinity between women and nature by virtue of the shared roles of nurturer, reproduction, and compassion
3. Rejection of any primordial link between women and nature as an anthropocentric justification for the continued domination of both

The first and second hypotheses are held by ecofeminist writers such as Charlene Spretnak and Vandana Shiva, share positions that are comparable to the feminine role in Taoist texts. The third hypothesis with supporters such as Karen J. Warren and Stephanie

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 66.



Lahar raises many interesting points concerning the disassociation of feminism from any historically “feminine” roles.

Charlene Spretnak claims that the systematic devaluation of women and nature is caused by the “acculturation” of patriarchy. Whereas pre-patriarchal cultures honored and revered the female as life-givers, Spretnak says that patriarchal societies used culture to diminish the importance of females. In pre-patriarchal societies, sacred symbols linking women and nature celebrated the transformative powers of the earth and the female.<sup>29</sup> Taoism and goddess cultures both celebrate the feminine unity pervasive in the universe, the “Mysterious Female” in Taoism and the “divine” in goddess spirituality. Spretnak expresses the presence of the divine: “The divine—creativity in the universe, or ultimate mystery—is laced throughout the cosmic manifestations in and around us. . . . It is possible to apprehend the divine transcendence as the sacred whole, or the infinite complexity of the universe.”<sup>30</sup> This description of the goddess concept of the divine parallels a passage from the *Tao te Ching* about the Mysterious Female:

The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;  
The named was the mother of the myriad of creatures. . . .  
These two are the same  
But diverge in name as they issue forth  
Being the same they are called mysteries,  
Mystery upon mystery—  
The gateway of the manifold secrets. . . .  
The spirit of the valley never dies.  
This is called the mysterious female.  
The gateway of the mysterious female  
Is called the root of heaven and earth.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Charlene Spretnak, “States of Grace,” in Armstrong and Botzler, *Environmental Ethics*, p. 466.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 471.

<sup>31</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, pp. 57, 62.

Vandana Shiva believes that these pre-patriarchal civilizations contribute valuable insight, specifically feminine insight, to environmental questions. Although she does not cite Taoist examples, she describes Indian concepts that closely resemble principles of Taoism. She claims that *Shakti* and *Prakriti* are evidence of the feminine role in Indian cosmology. Her description of these Indian concepts is analogous to the action of the Taoist concepts of *Tao*, *yin/yang*, and *ch'i*.

The tension between the opposites from which motion and movement arises is depicted as the first appearance of dynamic energy (Shakti). All existence arises from this primordial energy which is the substance of everything, pervading everything. The manifestation of this power, this energy, is called nature (Prakriti). Nature, both animate and inanimate, is thus an expression of Shakti; the feminine and creative principle.<sup>32</sup>

Shiva holds that these concepts are inclusive of nature, man, and woman without the dualism of Western rational tradition. In her opinion, the inherent unity in this explanation avoids the dichotomy of rational thought and the subjugation of both woman and nature.<sup>33</sup> Again, this explanation parallels the Taoist principle of *Tao* and its inherent unity.

### *Section 3*

#### *The Biological Connection between Women and Nature*

Another aspect of the feminine role in nature is the characterization of nature as “mother.” Vandana Shiva states that, although the association of women and nature was once used to perpetuate their domination, women should now embrace this bond “not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life.”<sup>34</sup> In what she calls the

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<sup>32</sup> Vandana Shiva, “Women in Nature,” in Armstrong and Botzler, *Environmental Ethics*, p. 459.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 460.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 464.

recovery of the feminine principle, Shiva envisions women as active participants in the shift away from ecological destructiveness towards creative activity.<sup>35</sup>

Carolyn Merchant maintains that the image of the Earth as a nurturing mother served as a safeguard against environmental violations before the sixteenth century. As the mechanistic model of the Scientific Revolution gained favor, these restraints were gradually banished. As a result, according to Merchant, delusions of mastery and domination justified abuse of the environment.<sup>36</sup>

The image of Earth as a living organism and nurturing mother had served as a cultural restraint restricting the actions of human beings. One does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold or mutilate her body. . . . As long as the Earth was considered to be alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of ethical behavior to carry out destructive acts against her.<sup>37</sup>

Merchant claims that, when the image of the Earth as mother, sustainer, and nurturer was discarded for the man-made machine model, these ethical sanctions were lifted. She states, “The removal of the animistic, organic assumptions about the cosmos constituted the death of nature—the most far reaching effect of the Scientific Revolution.”<sup>38</sup> Her hope is that the return of the holistic model of nature, with its organistic overtones, will engender an integrated and balanced environmental outlook.

The Earth as nurturing mother hypothesis corresponds to the Taoist representation of *tao* and its manifestation, nature, as the Great Mother. The *Tao te Ching* states, “When you know the mother go on to know the child. After you have known the child go back to holding fast to the mother, and to the end of your days you will not meet with

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 465.

<sup>36</sup> Carolyn Merchant, “The Death of Nature,” in Zimmerman et al, *Environmental Philosophy*, p. 279.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 285.

danger.”<sup>39</sup> Lao Tzu’s words parallel humanity’s progression of knowledge. Early societies revered the Earth as mother, and then later societies learned about the workings of the earth (the metaphorical child) through science. In the West, this scientific knowledge precipitated a detachment from the association of the earth with “mother.” Lao Tzu warns that humanity must use scientific knowledge to return to the mother-image and “hold fast” to it.

The Earth-as-mother metaphor provides several parallels between women and nature: women as protector, life-giver, and healer. All of these traditionally feminine roles can be extended beyond the mother/child bond to the female/environment relationship, thus implying that women are more psychologically suited to deal with environmental problems. The motherhood model in both ecofeminism and Taoism emphasizes participation in the cycles and rhythms of nature, not domination over them.

Although ecofeminist groups may disagree about the appropriateness of the earth-as-mother metaphor, many agree that feminine spirituality, in one form or another, would be a valuable addition to environmental discussions. According to various ecofeminists, feminine spirituality emphasizes interconnectedness with nature, egalitarianism, and a peaceful relationship with nature.<sup>40</sup> Charlene Spretnak claims that feminist spirituality is strategic as a political means of defense against the patriarchal religions; it is a source of empowerment in the struggle against the domination of women and nature.<sup>41</sup>

This is not to say that all ecofeminists wish to totally replace masculine rationality with feminine spirituality; most endorse a balance of the two. They seek an integration of

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<sup>39</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* p. 52.

<sup>40</sup> Greta Gaard, *Ecological Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), p. 23.

<sup>41</sup> Spretnak from Gaard, *Politics*, p. 23.

reason and intuition. Enlightened wisdom in the *Tao te Ching* is also a balance of reason and spirituality: “Know the male, but keep to the female.” Many ecofeminists agree with this sentiment. Eugenia Gatens-Robinson states, “The ecological agenda of healing the earth cannot succeed as long as the deep separation is maintained between instrumental reason and the ‘reason’ of emotion and spirit.”<sup>42</sup> Spretnak also believes that society needs to reintegrate science and spirituality in order to experience nature as a whole. She claims that feminine interconnectedness and caring are essential components of this process.<sup>43</sup> Ecofeminism wishes to reintegrate reason and feeling without the polarization of one over the other. According to Stephanie Lahar, “We are looking to develop a better alternative to a classically Western atomistic, materialistic worldview—without simply flipping to its polar opposite, a holistic, idealist one with a mirror image set of problems.”<sup>44</sup>

### *Criticisms and Conclusions*

#### *Criticisms*

Ecofeminist theories generate criticisms both from within and without their own ranks. Other environmental philosophies, including deep ecology, question the ecofeminist agenda concerning its singular focus on gender issues. Other ecofeminists question the beliefs and premises of other viewpoints concerning the feminine association with nature. Taoism has received a number of similar criticisms.

Bill Devall answers the ecofeminist claims that the dualism of androcentric value systems and epistemology instigate and perpetuate environmental problems. In his

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<sup>42</sup> Eugenia Gatens-Robinson, “Finding our Feminist Ways in Natural Philosophy and Religious Thought,” *Hypatia* (1994): 207.

<sup>43</sup> Spretnak from Gatens-Robinson, “Finding Our Feminist Ways,” p. 210.

<sup>44</sup> Stephanie Lahar, “Ecofeminist Theory and Grassroots Politics,” in Armstrong and Botzler, *Environmental Ethics*, p. 449.

opinion the charge of androcentrism is too simplistic, Devall claims that ecofeminists seem to say that, “if hierarchy and patriarchy were eliminated, that the ecological problems would be solved.”<sup>45</sup> He feels that ecofeminism offers the dissolution of patriarchy as a naive solution for a highly complex problem. Devall claims that there are many social structures that would remain in place even without patriarchy.<sup>46</sup> His complaint is that ecofeminists fail to direct enough attention to the “eco” in ecofeminism and focus too much on the “feminist” part.

Not all ecofeminists agree with Merchant’s correlation between feminine spirituality and archeological evidence of matriarchal societies. Eugenia Gatens-Robinson states her objections: “Some ecofeminists, including myself, find this mixing of scientific archeology and realist history with the development of this new mythopoetic processes for feminist spirituality very troubling.”<sup>47</sup> She discounts the borrowing of concepts from other cultures as “orientalism,” saying that feminists should be careful not to extend the terminology of their own society outside of its cultural taxonomy. In her opinion it is entirely possible that Asian and Neolithic cultures may not have understood the contemporary meaning of “goddess culture.”<sup>48</sup> Gatens-Robinson argues that the association between these cultures and modern feminism should be one of illumination, not verification. She states that the goddess-centered ecofeminists are “after a truth that heals severed connections, not only with nature, but with a human religious past, a past in which women have been oppressed and seen as other than sacred.”<sup>49</sup> In Gatens-

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<sup>45</sup> Bill Devall, “Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology—A Personal Response,” *Canadian Dimension* 25 (June 1991): 25.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>47</sup> Gatens-Robinson, “Finding Our Feminine Ways,” p. 218.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

Robinson's opinion, feminine spirituality is a personal understanding of interconnectedness, not a transfusion of empowerment from an ancient society.

Rosemary Radford Reuther and Elizabeth Fiorenza argue that the goddess-based theories are misguided or misinformed. They maintain that many goddess cultures were, in fact, subservient to patriarchal frameworks, and criticize goddess-centered feminists for romanticizing their servile connection to nature.<sup>50</sup>

Ecofeminists also disagree concerning the mother-as-Earth aspect of the feminine association with nature. Although the image of Mother Earth is an enduring metaphor for the feminine association with nature, many ecofeminist groups believe that it is both unwarranted and undesirable. Lynn Stearney states that the association rests on a projected image of motherhood that "confounds womanhood with motherhood."<sup>51</sup> She claims that the image of motherhood as selfless, nurturing, and unconditionally loving reduces women's identity to solely bearing and raising children. "The image of motherhood, while familiar and powerful, is both simplified and idealized."<sup>52</sup> In her opinion, the motherhood ideal is a patriarchal myth created to establish motherhood as a compulsory and oppressive role for all women. She criticizes ecofeminists such as Carolyn Merchant and Julia Scofield Russell, who hold the premise that women, by virtue of "feminine lived experience," have a special relationship with nature. Stearney states, "Ecofeminist rhetoric sets up the contextual framework that has the potential to confuse symbolic and concrete realities in both environmentalism and feminism."<sup>53</sup> She claims that ecofeminist support of the maternal ideal reinforces gender biases while

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>51</sup> Lynn M. Stearney, "Feminism, Ecofeminism, and the Maternal Archetype: Motherhood as a Feminine Universal," *Communications Quarterly* 42 (Spring 1994): 145.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

devaluing women who choose childlessness. In her opinion, the maternal archetype also devalues the role of men in the care of the earth, thus releasing them from the responsibilities of “fatherhood.”<sup>54</sup> Stearney recommends the following course of action.

We should continue to search for a powerful but ungendered image that can function to motivate and unify the environmental movement. The mother archetype, however powerful, cannot function in this way without reinforcing the contemporary patriarchal ideal of motherhood as natural, limitless, and exploitable.<sup>55</sup>

As noted earlier, Taoism is accused of similar transgressions. The Taoist principles of species egalitarianism have drawn charges of misanthropy from many quarters. Taoism’s reverence for the feminine qualities of non-aggression and non-assertion are commonly understood as criticisms of Confucianism’s patriarchal social structures. Although the *Tao te Ching* is rich with political and social commentary, it can be seen as anti-traditional, even subversive, for its time. The *Tao te Ching* taught against the conformity and blind obedience of the Confucian hierarchical structure. The *Chuang Tzu* not only criticized Confucian traditions, but also disavowed any form of organized society preferring the solitude of the wilderness. Thus, both Taoist works supported anti-establishment theories and were criticized accordingly, much as ecofeminist theories are criticized at the present time.

### *Conclusions*

The *Tao te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu* support many ecofeminist principles and beliefs: species egalitarianism, intuitive knowledge, non-aggression, cooperation, harmony with nature, and, foremost, a reverence for qualities historically associated with

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<sup>54</sup> Stearney, “Archetype,” p. 155.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.



the feminine. Consequently, it is surprising that more ecofeminist literature fails to cite Taoism directly. However, there may be a substantial basis for this omission.

First, Taoist philosophy does not represent a matriarchal society. Although the female is revered in its literature, Taoist texts do not advocate the worship of the female in symbolic ritual, as did goddess-centered societies. There is no archeological evidence linking Taoist beliefs to any female deities; in fact, Taoism does not acknowledge any sort of anthropomorphic deity or creator. Taoism may exalt feminine qualities, but as a gender, females did not hold any privileged position in Chinese society.

Second, China itself has a dismal record in the treatment of women. Practices such as foot-binding, selling girls into slavery, and even drowning female infants were tolerated until relatively recently. With China's enforced population controls, it is still common practice to abort female fetuses in the hope of conceiving a male child in the future. These discriminatory customs, and others just as unacceptable to Western sensibility, make Chinese society an unlikely role model for ecofeminists.

Third, the *Tao te Ching's* cryptic character may be too mystical for ecofeminists that feel the need for credible sources in a rationally biased value system. Although deductive argumentation may be a product of gender biased rationalism, it is presently the primary mode of discussion available to ecofeminists. The cryptic metaphors and analogies of the *Tao te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu* do not easily conform to the framework of logical argumentation. Therefore, ecofeminists may feel that Taoism lacks the rational authority to command intellectual credibility

## CONCLUSIONS

Other animal species ask no more from nature than they did a million years ago. Human beings are the only species that must struggle intellectually to re-establish a connection with their natural environment. Part of this struggle involves possessing a view of nature that facilitates this connection. The three environmental theories discussed seek an alternative perspective that transcends reason and logic, a perspective that combines the physical processes of nature with an integrated, holistic attitude. All three theories hold views compatible with Taoist tenets; mainstream environmentalists apply Taoist concepts directly to environmental processes, deep ecology acknowledges a Taoist influence, and ecofeminism promotes attitudes concerning nature and the feminine that closely resemble Taoist principles.

A review of Taoism in contemporary environmental literature and a survey of the objections against its influence yield the following conclusions:

1. Taoism contains normative guidelines for ethical attitudes and actions towards nature
2. Taoism presents a holistic and integrated human relationship with nature
3. Taoism supports cooperative and compassionate behaviors towards nature
4. Taoism elevates characteristics historically associated with the feminine
5. Taoism endorses the synthesis of intuitive and rational knowledge in understanding natural processes
6. Certain Taoist principles are useful tools in describing holistic processes in the contemporary ecological theory

All of these findings lead to the general conclusion that Taoist thought is, by and large, compatible with and applicable to the three environmental theories discussed in this

paper. Taoist thought offers an integrated, holistic, and compassionate point of view as a possible meta-foundation for a revised Western environmental ethic. The last section of this paper reviews specific applications of this conclusion.

As stated earlier, Taoism presents general guidelines for behavior and attitudes, but it does not entail specific instructions that can be applied directly to modern environmental problems. Naess, Sessions, Sylvan, and Bennett stress a number of concepts that correlate with Taoist tenets: egalitarianism, the unity and balance of nature, and a simple lifestyle. Although these principles are present in Taoism, they are not unique to its philosophy. Most pre-industrial societies exhibited a simple lifestyle. By definition, agrarian societies maintained a closer bond with nature than did urban societies. Naess's desire to completely recapture that primitive bond is impractical and unattainable for modern civilizations; even he acknowledges that fact. Much of deep ecological thought appeals to ideas similar to those of Chuang Tzu and Yang Chu; it represents an ascetic lifestyle that was extremist even in their times. As Van Wyck points out, the rustic way of life embraced by the primitivist element of society is a minority tradition, not a feasible alternative for the mainstream population. Returning to the simple lifestyle of the primitive societies may appear to be a romantic solution for present technological woes, but it is not a reasonable goal for modern society.

Another aspect of Taoism stressed by early deep ecological thought was the principle of natural order and balance as represented by the concept of *wu-wei*. Deep ecology's early "balance of nature" model as grounding for a "hands-off" environmental policy may have been appropriate for the equilibrium paradigm of the 1970's, but it is not applicable to the present flux-of-nature model of nature. Sylvan and Bennett endorse a strict interpretation of *wu-wei* as passively "letting nature take its course," but this advice

is unrealistic. For better or for worse, modern society has already altered the natural environment with the introduction of non-indigenous plant and animal species to many areas. Humans have removed natural habitats and predators for the remaining native wildlife. The biological cycles of nature have already been disturbed, they can never return to their aboriginal state. Continued human involvement is inevitable, but it can be less aggressive and destructive. Taoist thought does not encourage the total surrender to natural forces, but knowledge of those forces to achieve goals with less effort. Another problem with the “nature knows best” metaphor is the implication of a directed teleology in Taoism. There is no evidence of any purposeful higher power in Taoist thought. Although there are observable cycles of change in nature, both the *Tao te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu* deny any pre-determined design in the actions of *tao*.

Rolston critiqued Naess’s association of self-realization and *tao* by calling attention to the horizontal value system of *tao*, all things are equal in *tao*. Naess correlates his theory of wide identification with nature with the *tao*’s interrelatedness. His hypothesis is that personal identification with all nature will result in an equal concern for all beings. Rolston argued that environmental ethics requires a vertical value structure in order to resolve conflicts. In his opinion, Taoism does not offer a hierarchical value framework; therefore, it is irrelevant in ecological concerns. The problem with this argument is that although all things may equally possess *tao*, each entity expresses *tao* according to its own potential or *te*. According to Chuang Tzu’s philosophy, individual entities require different treatment because of their particular natures, thus there is no uniform system of behavior towards all things. As he points out, it would be counterproductive to put feet on fish or fins on oxen because it is not in their natures to possess them. All things have unique needs and should be treated

correspondingly. Taoism's value system may not have a rigid vertical hierarchy, but it is not uniformly horizontal either.

Ecofeminist groups differ in their specific tenets, but most ecofeminists maintain that the qualities of compassion, caring, and cooperation with nature should be incorporated into any balanced environmental ethic. Val Plumwood and Shu-hsien Liu claim that abstract rational thought has distanced humanity from nature. Their solution is to integrate emotion and compassion into the reasoning process for a balanced perspective. Merchant and Spretnak claim that the dominating aspect of masculine oriented technology has de-valued nature and women, causing the abuse of both. Vandana Shiva evokes the Indian concepts of *Prakriti* and *Shakti*, feminine precepts which closely mirror the actions of *tao*, *te*, and *ch'i*.

Correspondingly, one of Taoism's most distinctive features is its reverence for the feminine and its historically linked characteristics. Taoism elevates intuition over reason, cooperation over conquest, yielding over force, humility over pride, and ultimately, the female over the male. Qualities that are devalued, even denigrated, by Western rationality are exalted as positive virtues in Taoism. For this reason, Taoism seems especially relevant to ecofeminist theory. As stated earlier, there are few direct references to specific Taoist principles in ecofeminism; yet their premises are highly compatible. Neither philosophy desires the obliteration of analytical knowledge, only the tempering of facts and logic with an integrated knowledge stemming from experience and participation in the whole.

The authors cited in the section on mainstream environmentalism draw the most direct parallels with Taoist concepts and, in doing so, have attracted the most severe criticism. Rolston, Larson, and Bird criticize the use of Chinese concepts such as *tao*, *te*,

*ch'i*, and *wu-wei* in describing contemporary ecological theory. Their charges center on (1) the blending of scientific and religious principles, (2) the “conceptual mining” of foreign concepts without reference to contextual meaning and (3) the lack of pragmatic laws or guidelines.

Although all of these charges are legitimate, they too should be evaluated in context. The charge against the use of religious beliefs and terminology in scientific theory disregards the role of religion in Chinese culture. The lines between religion, philosophy, and social practice are blurred, if not absent, in Chinese culture. Chinese culture incorporates aspects of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism throughout society. Even Chinese religious practices commonly blend desirable features of each philosophy to suit personal preferences. Chinese philosophy, by its inclusive nature, is accepting of borrowed and modified ideas.

In answering the charges of disrespect or sacrilege to “pirated” religious beliefs and customs, a similar claim can be made. The *Tao te Ching*, although having a religious foundation, is considered more a social and political handbook than a bible. Modern political correctness rightfully demands a reverence for the sacred beliefs of other cultures—Native Americans, for example. Trophy-seeking tourists have desecrated native American religious artifacts and sites for generations; this is not the case with Taoist principles. The concepts of *tao*, *te*, *ch'i*, and *wu-wei* are not reserved for religious ritual, but are part of the established vocabulary of Chinese philosophy. In *feng-shui*, houses are designed and decorated by the principles of *tao* and *ch'i*; these concepts encompass every facet of daily life and are not reserved for religious ceremonies.

Another concern is Bird’s charge of the lack of contextual meaning. It is true that *tao*, *te*, *ch'i*, and *wu-wei* are part of a highly complex conceptual framework, and perhaps

Western society may never be able to fully grasp their meaning. Nevertheless, all cultures (including China) borrow concepts and terminology from other cultures. China appropriated Buddhism from India in the first century, then transformed its tenets to fit into its own belief system. This was not based on religious affiliation, but on a quest for longevity through the use of Indian elixirs and meditative techniques.

Why borrow concepts from other cultures in place of indigenous ideology and concepts? The answer is simple. Other cultures may contain complete and elaborate explanations of ideas or processes that are new to one's own culture. This is the case with Taoism and contemporary ecological theory. Centuries of reductionist thought have limited the number of holistic and integrated concepts available to Western philosophy. There are few examples of concepts demonstrating the total experience of natural systems; they were rarely examined as wholes, only as independent parts. Thus, the holism of *Tao*, *te*, *ch'i*, and *wu-wei* furnish an understanding of the contemporary ecological paradigm's interrelatedness that Western thought cannot.

These concepts are not presented by environmentalists as the basis for a complete metaphysics, but as heuristic tools in understanding the complex relationships of natural systems. They are also not intended as universalizable statutes or as the "blueprint" for environmental action that Rolston seeks. Normative Taoist guidelines, as presented by J. Baird Callicott, Po-Keung Ip, Roger T. Ames and Chung-ying Cheng, offer an alternate approach for a revised environmental attitude. In this context, Taoism is both a valuable and valid resource for environmental ethics.

In the final analysis, it is apparent that Taoist theory is profoundly holistic, interrelated, and distinctly feminine in character. Numerous passages in the *Tao te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu* complement contemporary environmental thought. In practice, these

ancient ideals may not provide specific solutions to contemporary environmental problems; however, they do offer normative guidelines for behavior and attitudes that engender a more compassionate approach to dealing with those problems. The environmental views discussed here have recognized this potential and have credited Taoism's influence on their respective theories.



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